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**HEARING VOICES IN THE DARK: DEPLOYING BLACK  
SONICITY AS A STRATEGY IN DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE**

**Committee:**

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Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, Supervisor

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Paul Bonin

---

Pam Christian

---

Stephen Gerald

---

Meta DuEwa Jones

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SONICITY AS A STRATEGY IN DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE**

**by**

**Marcus Emil McQuirter, BFA; MA**

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## **Dedication**

To the love of my life, Brandy Nicole McQuirter.

To my children Ezra Jacob McQuirter, Hannah Grace McQuirter, and Kaia Simone McQuirter.

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# **HEARING VOICES IN THE DARK: DEPLOYING BLACK SONICITY AS A STRATEGY IN DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE**

Marcus Emil McQuirter, Ph.D

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Supervisor: Omi Osun Joni L. Jones

Despite the apparent hegemony of vision in racial categorization, historically vocality has borne the brunt of as much racial presumption as physical appearance. This project explores ideas about Blackness, and how the voice in performance engenders conversations on racial authenticity within the United States. Broadly, the work examines how “sounding Black” functions within dramatic performance, and how wider concerns of racial identity adhere to a performer’s vocal choices. The contextualization of racialized sound presented in this project begins with an historical overview of how a “Blackness of tongue” has been framed in U.S. theatrical performance from the early 1800s through the 1960s. It then addresses the dynamics of voice and racial authenticity through two performance case studies: August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* and Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. These cases will be used to explore how issues of racial authenticity thrive in the space between vocal sound production and perception. As case studies based on specific productions of these two plays, text, directorial choices, and the vocal characteristics of the actors themselves occupy equal space at the center of each analysis. At a deeper level, this research seeks an understanding of the cultural

assumptions that support the idea of a uniquely Black vocal sound, and what that sound purchases within American societies. In addressing both the phonological and the interpretive qualities of these performances, the central research concerns of this project attempt to pinpoint with more accuracy how voice, fore-grounded in performance, triggers different sets of assumptions that have been commonly identified as a significant component of Blackness



## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	xiii
List of Figures .....	xiv
<b>PROLOGUE</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1, THE VOICE OF GOD</b>	<b>7</b>
Racial Formation Theory .....	9
The Elusive Signifier .....	12
Imagined Communities .....	14
Black Sonicity .....	17
This Blackness of Tongue .....	18
Defining Black Sonicity .....	24
Prosodic modeling .....	30
Sonic Miscegenation.....	33
Miscegenation.....	36
Theater Of Cruelty .....	40
Structure.....	46
<b>CHAPTER 2, AUDIO BLACKFACE AND BLACK CLASSICISM</b>	<b>48</b>
Audio Blackface .....	48
The Minstrel Tradition .....	49

“Amos ‘n’ Andy” .....	51
Black Classicism .....	58
“Because White People Are <del>Looking At</del> You” .....	58
The Spirituals.....	63
Song is the Voice .....	68
<b>CHAPTER 3, NEW NEGRO AND BLACK ARTS VOCAL THEORY</b>	<b>71</b>
New Negro Sound: Responding to the Minstrel Image/Echo .....	71
Folk Drama & Musicals .....	80
Black Minstrelsy .....	81
“Like Tightening Violin Strings” .....	88
Characteristics of Negro Expression: “Let ‘em search” .....	91
Black Arts Vocal Theory .....	93
Sing New Songs; Purify Old Ones: The Black Aesthetic .....	95
Black Arts Vocal Theory’s Aesthetic Legacy .....	102
<b>CHAPTER 4, THE SECOND TRADITION: BLACK SONICITY AND VOICE IN AUGUST WILSON’S <i>THE PIANO LESSON</i></b>	<b>107</b>
<i>The Piano Lesson</i> .....	107
Production History .....	108
The teleplay .....	109
Scripting Dialogue .....	110

Blues Aesthetic .....	113
Poetics of the Quotidian .....	113
Devoiced Final Consonants .....	116
Level patterns .....	122
Diphthongization of Medial Rhotic Sounds .....	124
Scripting the Ineffable .....	126
The Web of Black Sound: Musical and Sermonic Presences .....	130
“No Sugar in My Coffee” .....	132
“Berta, Berta” .....	134
“Who Shall I Send?” .....	139
The Way Black People Speak .....	148
<b>CHAPTER 5, THE KALEIDOPHONE: SONIC MISCEGENATION AND VOICE IN</b>	
<b><i>FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO</i></b> .....	<b>153</b>
Production History .....	153
The Play .....	155
Multiplicity as a Theme in Funnyhouse of a Negro .....	156
Arrangements of Multiple Voices for Individual Actors .....	161
Sarah .....	161
Mrs. Conrad .....	167
Patrice Lumumba .....	174
The Queen’s Chamber .....	177

The Choral Tradition: Interweaving the sounds of multiple actors.....	181
Staging Repetition.....	183
First Iteration .....	190
Second Iteration .....	191
Third Iteration.....	192
Conclusion .....	195
<b>CHAPTER 6, THE POLITICS OF SOUND</b>	<b>200</b>
The Case Studies .....	200
August Wilson’s <i>The Piano Lesson</i> .....	200
Adrienne Kennedy’s <i>Funnyhouse OF A Negro</i> .....	204
Authenticity.....	208
Goals of the Study .....	214
The Sound of Politics.....	219
<b>APPENDIX</b>	<b>223</b>
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	<b>231</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1 Blackout Schedule and Dictional Arrangement .....	188
Table 2 Comparative choral arrangements using degree of audibility as motif in rondo thematic patterning.....	193
Table 3 AAE Segmental Features (Consonant/Vowel).....	223
Table 4 AAE Super-segmental Features (Prosody) .....	226
Table 5 Prosodic Criteria for <i>The Piano Lesson</i> derived from Olly Wilson & Portia Maultsby's Conceptual Frameworks of Black Musical Traditions	227

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1 Phonological Imitations of AAE in Amos & Andy (Elizabeth McLeod)	228
Figure 2 Grammatical Imitations of AAE in Amos & Andy (Elizabeth McLeod)	229
Figure 3 Zora Neale Hurston's Examples of Linguistic Adornment.....	230

## PROLOGUE

Voice resonates with me. It is something to which I have been attuned since childhood. I don't know that I could tell you the exact source of my fascination with sound in performance. I know that as a youth the swell of hymns at the end of service always made me weep, and I was a frequent member of the procession coming down the center aisle to be saved, once again. I was fascinated by the deeply southern diction of my father's father, and loved to hear the accentual shift when my parents talked to relatives back home in Mississippi on the phone. And I used to love staring at the ceiling while lying on the big bed in their room as my mother talked about her mother, her aunt, their mother mothers, and generations I'd never met, but had come to know through her voice.

Despite an early flirtation with sound, I really had not considered sound as a critical tool until graduate school. Truthfully, I had never really regarded anything as a critical tool, or even considered the very idea of "critical tools," prior to my time at the university. My experience as a theater maker has always centered on guerilla practices, and the intellectual puzzles that go along with making a dollar out of fifteen cents. So on arrival at the university, I was not clear on how my practical experience as a carpenter, a garage band thespian, and a school teacher would fit with the theoretical concerns of university research. I struggled to find an intellectual space in the beginning. I did not know Foucault, Schecner, Butler, Roach, Derrida, or Kristeva. And so my first stabs at a research topic were an attempt to squeeze myself into something that seemed scholastically congruent with the work of my cohort. At first I thought I was going to research and write about race and gender issues, specifically examining African American masculinity in performance. But while a rich subject for exploration, the topic never really spoke to me.

A couple of semesters in, I found Omi Osun Joni L. Jones' "Performing Race" course. The readings and exercises shed new light on my original topic, and shifted my research question. Rather than asking after Black masculinity in performance, I began to consider Black masculinity as a performance. From there it was a simple leap to broaden the question to the performance of Blackness itself. Given the theatrical arena for these questions, a subsequent expansion of the question framed Blackness itself as a theatrical mechanism. Guerrilla roots kicked in. How can you use it, the assumption, that is, the assumptions concerning racial identity to generate new theatrical meaning? How can it function like costumes, lights, lines, leitmotifs, or soundtracks?

I started thinking about my most recent production work, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil*, and began to realize how central my ear had been in staging these two shows. And reliving other productions I'd written or directed, I started to understand how much I relied on the theatrical mechanics of vocality to create character and meaning. My style. So I began to weave the two things together: race as a thing performed vocally.

I took the course just as I was revamping my own voice and diction classes. I wanted to push my students to understand the manipulable mechanisms of voice—breath, relaxation, posture, pitch, rate, duration, resonance, volume, projection. Pedagogically, it seemed impossible to affect deep vocal changes in sixteen weeks after twenty years of bad habits. But I felt I could teach them to fish, that is, show them a path to a stronger vocal presence and point out the tools needed to get them there. Having coached debate and judged UIL for five years I felt I had a good grasp on vocal analysis and diagnosis. So I found myself re-sharpening my own mastery of critical vocalic concepts. It was an important process that better enabled me to listen, to describe, and to analyze voice in performance. I found that I could with increasing clarity, hear and identify the phonemic and prosodic features in a voice, and the continuities (or discontinuities) each voice shared with other voices or other vocal schemes.



I teach a diverse group of sound makers- ethnically, sexually, gendered-ly diverse, hearing impaired, sight impaired; ASL students turning sound into gestural language; education students who have to find sustainable classroom projection; psychology majors seeking confidence; pre-law majors seeking persuasive presence; students seeking accent reduction; actors working on basic technique as well as dialect acquisition. Most are from the central Texas area, but others come from other parts of the country and other parts of the world. Some sound “Texan,” some sound “south Texan,” some sound “New Jersey Black,” some sound “Oakland Black.” At times, the labels seem ridiculous. Yet despite the inconsistency between self identity and habitual dialects, sounds periodically emerge that are immediately labeled as “black” or “cholo” or “hick” or “ghetto” or “white” or “Mexican” or “foreign.” To complicate things, at times individual sound schemes shift in performance. So it became a question, a thousand questions really, of picking all of that sonic production and aural perception apart. It opened my ear to the ways other people around me (and on blogs, on the radio, in personal conversations) swam in that same pool of assumptions based on idiolect, and to the ways that circumstance can dictate phonic choices. Again, I gathered these observations back to the theatrical arena, and a central tenet in my own theatrical aesthetic: performance is about choices.

With all of this buzzing in my head, I had the good fortune to participate in Meta DuEwa Jones’s “Theorizing the Body” course in the English department. I think that Jones’ approach to performance as a poet inspired me to not only think outside of the box, but to look at the box itself as a crucial informational site during analysis. It is probably standard form for most scholastic research, but I’d never given much credence to reading the acknowledgements, looking at cover art, really plowing through endnotes for clues to style and literary voice. Granted, with dramatic production, the audience seldom sees the script as it hears it. But staging provides a visual corollary, where the graphemic becomes the kinesthetic, words become three-dimensional, and sound manifest as a geographic property through acoustics. (I am reminded of this in

*Funnyhouse* as Sarah reflects on the “geometric positions of words on paper.”) In this way, Jones’s oppositional reading practices adhere in dramatic analyses because the theatrical setting engages the witness on a number of sensory fronts, all of which help to create meaning. People in the seats are at once spectators and audience, (as well as proprioceptors, thermoreceptors, and chemoreceptors.)

Moreover, “Theorizing the Body” introduced me to important critical methodologies in approaching the phenomenon of sound itself. It is where I encountered Alexander Weheliye’s work, Tracie Morris, Afro-futurist scholarship, and the expanse of critical thought addressing the place of sound in Black studies. Jones’ own writings model a unique approach to phonetic analysis, bridging written poetry, its oral performance, and the milieu of musical sound that informs and inflects both text and performance. The approach to performance analysis through jazz prosody offers a vitally important place to consider things like “visual appearance, line length, word count,” and the visual symmetry of the words, making sound a visible medium. And it does so alongside thick descriptions of syllabic variety, stress, meter, alliteration, consonantal repetition, variant repetition, anaphora, and syllabic excess. I am indebted to her exploration of the “...avenues of interpretive possibility that open up when we critically listen” to a particular text or performance. (55)

It is my hope that this research project marks another opening up of interpretive possibilities, and contributes to the field of Black Performance Studies. Two hundred and forty-nine pages later, I feel like I have only scratch the surface. But I have discovered how pervasive these questions of sound and specifically of voice are across the spectrum of cultural studies. It has raised a number of new case possibilities for me already.

I am wondering, for instance, how to expand the current study to encompass Afro futurism, and the techno-vocal theories at play within hip hop culture particularly as its vocality exceeds the music and influences other oral forms within and across racial boundaries.

I am curious about the persistence/absence of racialized voice in animation and speculative fiction, from Jar Jar Binks to *The Boondocks*. What are the implications (both culturally and in terms of actor employment) of *The Cleveland Show*, a prime time animation series about a Black family voiced by a multiracial cast?

I am interested in exploring the communalizing effect of vocal sound in the live stage work of gospel musicals. What is the effect of recycling voice between performer and audience in moments seemingly crafted for audience response and vocalized commentary.

And in examining the box of aurality itself, my experience in the classroom has led me to think about the ways vocality works in hearing impaired performance practices, and in the work of sight impaired theater artists. Does the idea of racialized sound erupt in the work of artists like Michelle Banks, a deaf Black woman whose theatrical performance is interpreted and voiced for hearing audiences. Who's voice, and does it matter? Conversely, in the work of sight impaired theater artists or audiences, does a particular phonemic scheme, for example, "sounding Black," affect reception?

I feel blessed for the opportunity to ask these kind of questions, and to have had the artistic and academic guidance that to enable me to pursue them. What I am really eager to explore with regard to this work are how to refine the critical tools of Black sonicity and sonic miscegenation such that they function both as post production analytical lenses, and as pre-production aesthetic choices.

My exploration of voice, Blackness, and performance touches on a number of disciplines. I have listened to scholars in performance, linguistics, feminist theory, political science, phonetics, history, musicology, literary criticism, and a host of other disciplines. The range of discourses enables me to better understand the implications of my own research and to discover new ways of approaching performance. My sources and advisors have provided me with important critical perspectives, but I also draw inspiration from their efforts. Again, I have come to realize that the work I have done at

the University is only a beginning in what I hope is a lifelong investigation of the sonic aspects of Black cultural expressivity.

## CHAPTER 1, THE VOICE OF GOD

In a recent article for *Time* magazine, contributor Michael Kinsley talked about the evolution of the voice of God in American media. Kinsley noted that in the pre-Civil rights era, the recognizable voice of God belonged to Alexander Scourby, a Brooklyn-born son of Greek immigrants whose deep resonant voice carried an undeniably British lilt. Scourby's voice work in documentaries, commercials, and in recordings of the Bible and the Koran, reinforced longstanding American assumptions that "a British accent conveyed authority, dignity, power." (Kinsey) But Kinsey asserts the days of the Brit sound are over. The new voice of God (of CNN and of the world's most famous movie villain) is Black<sup>1</sup>. According to Kinsey, the sound of James Earl Jones, born of a Black rhetorical tradition that includes Martin Luther King, Jr. and President Barack H. Obama, has supplanted the space of authority, dignity, and power once reserved for the British Received Pronunciation accent. Kinsey suggests that, at heart, the privileged position of sounding Black (which he keeps distinct from being Black) stems from "the therapeutic notion that suffering confers dignity and authority." (Kinsey)

Kinsey's argument raises a number of questions. To begin, *exactly* what does it mean to sound Black? What is similar in the speech habits of James Earl Jones (a classically trained actor), Martin Luther King, Jr. (a Baptist minister), and Barack Obama (a lawyer and politician)? Do they have similar physiologies? Have they shared the same experience? Is it a necessarily an exclusively masculine quality? What of the voices of Maya Angelou, Della Reese, or Gloria Foster? Who exactly regards the Black voice as dignified and authoritative? To whom is the idea of therapeutic, therapeutic?

It is difficult to assert either that the Black voice in performance is uniform, or

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document, I choose to capitalize Black and White when referring to racial categories, and use lowercase script when describing actual color tones, e.g. "Black people" vs. blackface minstrelsy.

that it always conjures up the qualities Kinsey ascribes to it. One can, however, observe and document the use of what Henry Louis Gates dubs a “Blackness of tongue” in our everyday lives. (H. L. Gates 2) Moreover, that same linguistic complex also serves as a unique currency in U.S. social arenas. From the white rapper, to the Vietnamese youth who grows up around Black people, we know sounding Black to be a recognizable phenomenon that carries a host of social values. Those values erupt in our everyday lives, but also articulate a range of meanings in performance.

What Kinsey observes is central to the research questions of my project: an exploration of Blackness in performance, and how the voice in dramatic production enters the conversation on racial authenticity. First, I will frame my theoretical poles within the context of contemporary racial formation theory. I will then review the history of vocal Blackness within the United States, and how “sounding Black” has been understood historically in dramatic performance. I will then execute two case studies in performance to investigate how the voice in dramatic performance can alternately affirm or subvert racial categories using August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* and Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. Similar to the theatrically invented voice of God, each of these plays deal with ghosts, and stage the unseen as propellant dramatic forces. But where the latter tends to deploy a disembodied voice source-unseen, those explored in this text center the human *body*, male and female, as sonic sources, and the *body* of African American cultural expression as epistemological referents through the calculating medium of performance. Meanings are constructed through the interplay of theatrically auditory and visual experience.

The case studies represent two distinct approaches to vocal performance as a place of racial identity and meaning— one that seeks authenticity, and one that subverts

it. The first study in “Black Sonicity” investigates the ways in which racial authenticity<sup>2</sup> is marked through voice in performance as a manifestation of broader sound practices nestled in the African American experience. I examine the Blues as a prosodic model in Lloyd Richards’s television production of August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*. As a foil to the Wilson case study, I also want to explore “sonic miscegenation,” where the ideas of race, blending, sensuality, intimacy, and transgression coalesce in voice and sound. To that end I will look at my own production of Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and how mixing racially coded sonic patterns in performance can become the unique, convulsive theatrical language that Antonin Artaud advocated for a Theater of Cruelty.

These cases exemplify how issues of racial authenticity thrive in the space between sound production and reception. How can one use Black sound hegemonically? Subversively? At a deeper level, I seek an understanding of the cultural assumptions that support the idea of a unique Black sound, and what that sound purchases within American societies.

## **Racial Formation Theory**

Exploring Blackness through performance represents an important seam in the fabric of American race studies. Using the voice to locate meaning and assess value contributes an important thread to that stitch. To better address how the voice in performance functions as a site for racial identity, I will approach the questions of race, racial authenticity, and Blackness first through Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s theories of racial formation.

For the greater portion of the modern age, race has meant the grouping of human beings based on the identification and valuation of biological, social, and psychological

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<sup>2</sup> A loaded and ever shifting term I will chase throughout my project. At times it reflects a sense of verisimilitude with respect to specific subjects, at other times it suggests a broad, essentialized understanding of identities.

traits. A number of treatises emerged in the nineteenth century seeking a scientific basis for patriarchal white supremacy. Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1853-55), for instance, asserted that the decline of civilizations was determined by the increasing degradation of the racial composition of a society in relation to its expansion through conquest and alliance. At its root was the assumption of differing levels of innate intelligence according to race. It was an argument adopted by Southern polygenists in the US in the mid to late 1800s. Polygenists like Josiah C. Nott (*Types of Mankind*, 1854) and George R. Gliddon (*Indigenous Races of the Earth*, 1857) offered a racial taxonomy of humankind premised on the notion of separate, distinct creation and evolutionary paths for each race. Extending the arguments of Gobineau, their conclusions "continued to assert that science declared the Negro subhuman." (Graves 74) As it collided with the theories of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, American polygenist ideas sought to explain race and social class as products of natural selection, the survival of the fittest race, as it were, where whites had been historically "favored" due to an innate, biologically grounded intellectual superiority and a resulting exceptional cultural fitness.

Omi and Winant's analysis of racial formation offers a different perspective on how race functions in the United States. Briefly, racial formation theory (RFT) sees race as the result of socio-historical processes (also called racial projects) that reorganize people, relationships, and resources within a society. This traditional reading of race implies that racial characteristics, good or bad, are unchangeable and universal. Modern genetics, however, suggest that race is an unstable taxonomy because the traits we think of as racial indicators— skin, hair, bone structure, language, cultural practices, or sound— do not parallel genetic profiles. As a result, the categorization of humanity known as race can (and has been) "re-aggregated from trait to trait." (R. Wallace) What is more, across time and across geography, clear definitions of race have been unstable. Performance, law, custom, and biology have each defined these categories toward discrete, often incongruous ends.



Take for instance American citizenship laws. During the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century, in Virginia, 1/16 African ancestry qualified a person as Black. Over the same period, Florida law stated that 1/8 African ancestry was the cut-off, and in Alabama, any African ancestry “meant” a person was Black. This kind of inconsistency throughout the Americas characterizes racial categorization from the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Yet while race certainly remains chimerical, Omi and Winant do not suggest that it is a mirage easily rinsed away from contemporary society. On the contrary, racial formation has had very material consequences over the last five centuries. To be sure, race has never been a dispassionate, objective division of people into groups based on “likeness.” Race is not just taxonomy. Rather, inequality occupies the center of racialist thought. From its inception, racialism as an epistemology has been a system of oppression in and of itself.<sup>3</sup> As James Horton notes, “once your race is defined... it defines your opportunities.” (Horton)

So racial formation theory contextualizes classical definitions of race as reflections of a particular historical moment, and acknowledges the lived experience of race. In doing so, theorists like Robyn Wiegman seek to render race, racism, and racial categories as epistemologies “less familiar” and “less natural.” Similarly, racial formation theory envisions an understanding of race which no longer appears as a universally logical means of social organization. Instead, it reveals race to be constructed, and therefore de-constructible. As such, racial formation theory seeks not only to define race, but to explain how racial categories are formed and collapsed, how individuals and institutions perpetuate notions about what race is, how people embody race, and how people subvert the presumptions of race. The latter two aims inform my

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<sup>3</sup> On some level, by engaging in a discussion of race, by recognizing it through dissertations and public discourses, we collude in its perpetuation, and thereby in the perpetuation of oppression. At the same time, to not discuss race is to ignore its very material consequences as a social phenomenon. To not discuss it is an equally anti revolutionary collusion.

exploration of voice and performance in this study.

### **THE ELUSIVE SIGNIFIER**

Examining how the voice in dramatic performance can alternately affirm or subvert racial categories draws on the fundamental premise of racial formation theory: racial categories are neither static nor comprehensive. Michael Kinsey's article, for instance, raises the question whether the African American-ness of a speaker is phonological or sociological. Is there some substratum of Blackness that connects them all? It puts to us: does the authority read in a voice depend on knowing the speaker's race? Is there a physiological link among Black speakers?

Answers about authenticity also depend on who is asking the questions? The media? The consuming audience? Producers and casting directors? Who defines Blackness, and to what end? As a theater-maker, I recognize that many of the paradigms of vocal authenticity deployed in the past continue to affect casting and directorial choices. And broad racial assumptions generated by public performance remain in conversation with how one sounds in real life. At the same time, many of the aforementioned paradigms of vocal authenticity are exactly what Black audiences look for in For-Us/By-Us (Near & About) theater, television, and film. That desire, that taste for the "real" can be at once comforting, and in another instant, quite limiting. Each of these questions interrogates the idea of authenticity. Thus while challenging racial categories as socially constructed, I will also explore more essentialist ideas on sound, and strategies that affirm racial "*authenticity*" as strategic, uplifting, and progressive.

The discourse on racial authenticity with regard to performance centers around two opposing poles. At one end, the rhetoric of Black authenticity has often delimited Blackness and derailed efforts to expand Blackness beyond the confines of racist essentialisms and intersectional blindness. At the same time, authenticity also functions as a significant aesthetic principle, as a strategy for resistance, and the grounds for erecting communities in the face of racial denigration.

This ebb and flow of certainty also marks the larger struggle to define Blackness. It is why E. Patrick Johnson calls it the “elusive signifier.” (2) In fact, contestation may house the most stable definition of Blackness. As Johnson suggests, one definition of Blackness is the fight to define Blackness. Johnson considers Black authenticity over determined, that is, contingent on a given socio-historical context. In this, authenticity appears not only as arbitrary, but also as liquid and pecuniary, often buying the exclusion of “more voices than it has included.” (3) In his critique of both Black Arts movement leaders and African American literary theorists of the 1980s and 1990s, Johnson warns against chauvinistic and homophobic approaches to defining Blackness whether they are rhetorical, creative, or critical expressions.

Similarly, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, in her articulation of a theatrical jazz aesthetic, proposes performance philosophies that envision and embody Blackness “as something beyond phenotype.” (600) In each case, these theorists urge scholars, critics and artists to dig deep and wide for Blackness, to till, turn, excavate, and unearth a Blackness that “encompasses multiple realities.” (600) By insisting on the excavation of multiple realities, both Jones and Johnson hope to prevent the conception of African America as monolithic. Broadening Blackness also unsettles the very idea of race, working to deconstruct it as immutable and predetermining. Without dismantling the idea of authenticity, these theorists critique racial categories and essentialisms as “transhistorical” fictions. Here the goal is “to complicate the ways in which Blackness is narrativized, experienced, and produced in the ongoing process of culture.” (E. P. Johnson 245)

Like Omi and Winant, neither Jones nor Johnson suggests that Blackness is ephemeral or diminished. Instead, Black Performance Studies situates the critical mass of authenticity within action, rather than within corporeal “facts of Blackness.” (Fanon 109) Blackness, then, in terms of performance, functions less as a stable ontological record, than as a series of signification. With the discrediting of race as biology, race most often now signifies culture, i.e. “behaviors, attitudes, and politics.” (Rodman 109)

In addition, the fundamental instability of race accorded by RFT invites a reading of race through the lens of performance. Viewed as such, race appears, in part, as artifice rather than as essence. In performance, we easily cross these lines through embodiment and intersectionality. Jones, for instance, uses casting choices and “‘Playing Black’ ... in the most inclusive terms” to see Blackness across the quicksand of phenotype. (599) As a result, in performance, Black Performance Studies theories witness a transgression of the final stronghold of racial categorization: behavior. Beyond behavior— that most malleable of the vessels to have carried race over the last five centuries— where is there for the presumption of race to retreat?

### IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Black performance theory, armed with historical precedent, warns against the erecting of authenticity as an exclusionary border around Blackness. Still, others argue that the notion of authenticity— of establishing boundaries— can also function as a source of security, community, and connection to something larger than self. Moreover, dismantling authenticity as a lens for performance removes an important measurement in the critique of inaccurate depictions of Black life or appropriations of Black expressivity. As Johnson acknowledges, authentication discourse, while rhetorically potent, also “enables marginalized people to counter oppressive representations of themselves.” (3)

As Black performance theory challenges the idea of race as essence, it posits race as lived experience. Yet by de-centering phenotype in racial classification, it also entertains race as a replication of tropes. Without undermining this approach to race in performance, I would add that such a replication hinges on accuracy, or on an *authentic* replication of tropes. In his chapter on pedagogy, Johnson describes two student performances from his Performance of African American Literature class. In the first, a South Asian student named Andy performs the opening to *God’s Trombones*, capturing the trope of Black folk preaching well enough to “move the audience to rapture.” Andy wows the crowd. Sally, on the other hand, (White, American, and Southern) fails to

convincingly capture her character's Black-southern-woman-ness in a performance of Maggie from Alice Walker's "Everyday Use." (239)

Why?

Might it be because Andy's performance was of *quality*, and Sally was not? To be more specific, Andy's performance accurately replicated a set of oratorical gestures. As a replica, it had a high degree of *authenticity*, here read as *accuracy*, and that is one reason his performance was validated by the audience. Sally's portrayal of the character, despite the demographic proximity she had to her subject (in terms of class, gender, and geography) had little congruence to anything from "real life." While authenticity is "over-determined" in each case, in performance a performer has to substantiate the performance *in order for* the audience to suspend its disbelief. Andy's performance was validated as an accurate replication of tropes associated with African American culture for this particular multiracial audience, even if his appearance did not align with common phenotypic characterizations of African Americans. It does not seem that the audience negotiated the standard for folk preacher authenticity. Andy simply met the audience's standard.

Johnson's example does suggest that the phenotypic basis of Black authenticity is fragile at best. But it simultaneously confirms that there are tropes within the collective consciousness identified as markers of Blackness. What I am suggesting is that in this approach to authenticity, one may find a foundation for "imagined communities," coalescing in large part around a common sense of what its members consider to be authentic. (Anderson 6)

At the micro-level of racial projects described by Omi and Winant's analysis, race is also an important marker of personal and communal identity. At the micro level, racial formation can represent more than a Manichean scheme for reordering economic resources and political capital. In his discussion of identity formation, Robin D. G. Kelley points out that race is a process of "identity formation and reformation." (R. D. Kelley) We inhabit identities thrust upon us by others, and reinforce them through our

enactment of them.

Even as identities are thrust upon us, the opportunity arises for the construction of new relationships and new progressive communities. Though imposed, these new identities are also shared. Consequently, space exists in which to invent identities based on shared values, even if a community is socio-politically formed based solely on phenotype. In other words, groups of people have built communities in order to escape the pre-determinism and inequality inherent in imposed racial categories. Identities then emerge based on those groupings despite the fact that racism “produced the circumstances for that basis of unity.” (R. D. Kelley) In this sense, race (in general) and Blackness (specifically) emerge as progressive states of “political self recovery,” as bell hooks observes. (220) To be more specific, Black performances and expressivity have traditionally occupied a space of value, and Black communities have erected themselves around sets of aesthetic expectation. The discourse of authenticity occupies a significant position among the aesthetic principle guiding African American cultural expression. Worship aesthetics in Black churches are a prime example in which voice, performance, and the idea of Black authenticity can function as a unifying value, as an aesthetic foundation, and as an example of shared communal values. Black oral traditions privilege authenticity, both its literal expression as with testimonials in spiritual practice, and its figurative incarnation in the edict to “keep it real” in underground Hip Hop (not to be confused with the commercialized gangsterism or swagga-docio of mainstream Hip Hop). Authenticity as an aesthetic rule manifests in form as well as content. Improvisation, for instance, can function as a formulaic exercise in authenticity. Yet whether as content or form, authenticity only exists when it is performed, and only when its performance is validated as by the community. In this, expressivity has enabled African and African derived populations to imagine and carved out an autonomous sense of community.

Thus, hooks proposes “performance as a site to build communities of resistance.” (219) In this context, adherence to particular standards of authenticity creates imagined

communities bound by a set of conventions and aesthetic expectations. For hooks, performance and authenticity address the sickness plaguing African American post modern identity: the “the absence of community, alienation from everyday reality, a fragmented individuality, and the loss of organized resistance.” (219) In hooks’ estimation, performance has a practical, political application.

The Black voice is temporal and changing, and ultimately, a thing of its time. The ways of thinking about race modeled in racial formation theory provide useful models for investigating the vacillating racialization of vocal performances. Performance as a lens allows us to map the construction and deconstruction of racial meanings. With performance, in the house of masks, we can recreate the construction of race, deconstruct it, experiment with it, “slow motion” it, chop and screw it. Two ways that Black performance studies can approach this deconstruction of racialized sound are through the lenses of Black sonicity and sonic miscegenation.

### **Black Sonicity**

While my case studies chiefly center on theatrical subjects, a good deal of the scholarship I rely on for analysis originates in other disciplines. The crossroad of voice and racial identity nestles in a much broader field of sonic critical studies, an emerging discipline addressing the role of sound in culture. Sound as an artifact of race connects the fields of performance, rhetoric, linguistics, musicology, and literary theory. Research into African American English, for example, ties the phonology of dialect to its cultural significance in American society. The body of scholarship on Black music ranges from historical catalogues to the role of music in definitions of Blackness. Interestingly, African American literary theory, ironically centered on non-sonic forms (written texts), regularly investigates what is meant by “Black sound.” This pursuit by African American literary scholars points to the way sound often permeates discussions of Afro-American cultural expression. Sonic studies, for scholars within Diasporic studies, is rich

and well turned earth.<sup>4</sup> Very little exists, however, in the way of performance scholarship on this connection between race and sound. I hope to bridge that gap through this work, and insert dramatic performance as a contributing voice in the tradition of what I call Black sonicity.

### THIS BLACKNESS OF TONGUE

Henry Louis Gates' *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988) knits together two different understandings of "voice," bringing its use to indicate style together with voice as the oral/aural product of human speech. From these threads, Gates weaves the origins of an African American literary theory based in the spoken vernacular. Gates also suggests that a "Blackness of tongue," is the most significant marker of racial difference. (2) While this may essentialize Black vocal production (and Black people), Gates' observation holds some validity. While he does not tease out the characteristics or sources of this Blackness of tongue, or really address *how* it functions as an important marker of race, Gates' comments point toward a phonologically unique dialect. But what is the source of this unique phonological and rhetorical quality known as the Black voice? What are the things to look for during an analysis of voices in performance? In analyzing the case studies in this project, it is important to define these categories and to identify which are most relevant to the analysis of vocal sound in dramatic performance.

I would like to take a moment to unearth those distinctive characteristics in

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<sup>4</sup> A number of sonic critical scholars find race as a generative intersection for sound studies: Alex W. Black's "Abolition's Musical Bodies" (abolitionist's texts and Black women's performances); Art M. Blake "Audible Citizenship and Audiomobility" (race, the CB Radio and technology); Jon Cruz's *Culture on the Margins*, (1999); Nina Sun Eidsheim's "Voice as a Technology of Selfhood" (race and vocal timbre in classical music); Fred Moten's *In The Break*, 2003 (sound as a simultaneous aesthetic and radical political manifestation of black resistance.) Mendi Obadike's "Low Fidelity" (sonically stereotyping blackness); Derek Vaillant's "The Sounds of Whiteness" (sound, racial codes, and Chicago radio in the 1920s and 1930s); Alexander Weheliye's *Phonographies*, 2005 (sonic Afro-modernity), and Kodwo Eshun's *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures In Sonic Fiction* (1998).



African American speech catalogued in linguistic research that help comprise the Black sound this study seeks to understand.<sup>5</sup> Linguistically, African American English<sup>6</sup> (AAE) consists of a number of rhetorical and structural features, though scholars still debate its origin and evolution. Some such as linguist John McWhorter<sup>7</sup> cite the influence of Hiberno-Scottish pidgins on isolated captive populations for the unique sound of AAE. McWhorter holds that the presence of West African languages within AAE is “absolutely infinitesimal.” (McWhorter) Others, like Lisa Green, Geneva Smitherman, Walter Wolfram, and Molefi Asante interrogate the link between African American English, one of many Afro-European linguistic creolizations in the New World, and West African languages. This theory of African retentions is of particular import because it is the school of thought that guides August Wilson’s aesthetic approach, and that permeates the milieu in which Adrienne Kennedy wrote.

Molefi Asante’s research examines the retentions of Niger-Congo languages within African American English. He echoes Olly Wilson’s assertion that African retentions most often arise as conceptual frameworks rather than as specific lexical artifacts. That is, retentions reveal themselves in the social language behavior of AAE, and in the communication style exhibited by many AAE speakers. Specifically, Asante argues, African American English resembles other Niger Congo derived language systems in its approach to “folkloristic modalities” (e.g. proverbs), its predilection for

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<sup>5</sup> Linguists John R. Rickford, Lisa Green, Geneva Smitherman, and William Lubov have argued that AAE is not simply bad English, but rather a systematic linguistic form.

<sup>6</sup> African American English has, like black folk, have had a number of different names: African American Vernacular English (AAVE); African American English; Black English, Black Vernacular, Black English Vernacular (BEV), Ebonics, Black Vernacular English (BVE), or African American Language (AAL).

<sup>7</sup> See the interview with McWhorter on National Public Radio’s *Talk of the Nation*, entitled “Op-Ed: DEA Call For Ebonics Experts Smart Move.” McWhorter characterizes AAE as “a very interesting hybrid of regional dialects of Great Britain that slaves in America were exposed to because they often worked alongside the indentured servants who spoke those dialects that we often learn about in school.” (McWhorter)

competitive speech events (e.g. riddles, dozens), and in its penchant for communal speech events (e.g. call-and-response.). In each case, a high degree of social valuation adheres to the improvisational use of spoken language.

Asante further argues that the unique quality of Black speech also derives from three West African structural aspects: a) *tonal root* (changes in pitch create different words or meanings); b) *serial verbal construction* (The use of several verbs to express actions that require only one verb in English); and c) *tense aspect*<sup>8</sup> (how a verb construction can indicate an actions' level of completion, duration, repetition, without a specific reference to its position in time.). Asante argues that each demonstrate clear Niger Congo retentions. The “color” and “expressivity” often ascribed to speakers of AAE, for instance, surface from the vestigial shades of tonal systems wherein pitch distinctions work to differentiate words similar to the way Indo-European languages use stress. Asante goes on to make broader generalizations that connect sound to racial authenticity:

Vocal color plays a vital role for the Black public speaker, particularly the preacher, who utilizes various intonations and inflections to modify or amplify specific ideas, concepts, or emotions... In fact, the so-called Black voice can be recognized by other Ebonics speakers by pitch and tone. Thus the more prevalent the African rhythm, tone, and pitch in the vocalization, the more distinctly African is the voice. (25)

Along with the social language behavior of AAE, these syntactical phenomena provide additional ways to pinpoint the tongue which Gates calls Black.

Linguists distinguish between two important elements when examining spoken language. The **segmental** is “any discrete unit or phone, produced by the vocal apparatus, or a representation of such a unit,” and the **super-segmental** refers to the

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<sup>8</sup> According to Asante, “the dissecting quality of African linguistic expression,” reveals itself in the way the rules of AAE follow those of many West African languages. Asante notes that AAE “attach little significance to the actual time when an event takes place; on the contrary, they stress the manner of the action.

“vocal effect that extends over more than one sound segment in an utterance, such as pitch, stress, or juncture pattern.” (SIL International) In her description of AAE, Lisa Green cites both segmental<sup>9</sup> and super-segmental features<sup>10</sup> unique to AAE. Green identifies the unique segmental action of initial, medial and final consonant sounds, of vowel sounds in certain environments, and of the voicing value of consonant sounds. But the super-segmental aspects of AAE—fairly recognizable stress patterns and intonation contours—are its most revealing markers in performance.

Prosody, often called the music of language, is a key element marking AAE as unique. For Green, prosodic features in speech are the place where “sounding Black” occurs at its deepest level. For the playwright, director, or critical reader, any attempt to address what it means to “sound Black” must radiate from an understanding of Black prosodic patterns. The “rhythm and modulations of speech” used by some AAE speakers are the meat of its distinctiveness. Indeed, prosodic patterns can explain why a speaker using Standard English syntax and grammar might still “sound Black.”<sup>11</sup>

Both Asante and Green identify key prosodic features found in AAE. As Green notes, a “wide intonation range may be an important clue to the unique value ascribed to Black speaking voice.” (127) ***Syllable initial stress patterning*** involves shifting the stress in certain bi-syllabic words from the second syllable to the first. For example, a common front shifting occurs in the word Detroit. (E.g. from de.TROIT to DE.troit). ***Intonation contours*** are another area of distinctiveness for AAE speakers. Linguistic studies reveal that in many cases speakers of AAE employ a wider pitch range in general conversation, but simultaneously employ a “more level and rising final pitch contour” in

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<sup>9</sup> See Table 3 AAE Segmental Features (Consonant/Vowel)

<sup>10</sup> See Table 4 AAE Super-segmental Features (Prosody)

<sup>11</sup> The result, what is called standard AAE, is of particular significance for the AAE speaking actor engaging non AAE texts, as well as the non AAE actor approaching AAE derived texts. As an actor, director, and teacher, I have often felt that accent kits for Black dialects teach segments, but wondered if they effectively teach super-segments.

an informal situation.<sup>12</sup> Investigations into intonation contours also show a more frequent use of falling final pitch contours with yes-no questions in formal, threatening situations, but level and rising final contours in informal, familiar situations. (126)

So the rhythm of AAE is going to sound different from that of mainstream English. What is more, the difference in prosodic approaches between Standard English and AAE often results in different interpretations of meaning, and subsequent extrapolations concerning the nature of the speaker. Asante's hypothesis of AAE's tonal origins holds that *tone-as-semantics* in Niger Congo languages becomes to *tone-as-vocal-color* in African American English. Within the linguistic environment of Standard English, intonational shifts that might have indicated new words or significant meaning might now simply convey "attitude." That is, to an AAE speaker, a narrow intonational range might read as dispassion or arrogance to those expecting tonal variety. Conversely, a wider range of intonation might signal aggression to those unfamiliar with such range. In short, a speaker may not share the listener's assessment.

Research into prosody yields "formal descriptions" for "impressionistic statements" about sounding Black. As a result, a number of researchers have examined the question of sounding Black through quantitative analysis. Sociolinguist John R. Rickford (1972), for instance, explored the question of sounding Black simply by asking listeners to identify a speaker's ethnicity based on a short speech sample written in Standard English. Overwhelmingly, the listener correctly identified the speaker, suggesting that stress patterns, intonation, and pronunciation served as clues to the ethnicity of speakers." (L. J. Green 124) Due to the constancy of the sample text, Rickford's study suggested that prosodic features functioned as "indicators of the

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<sup>12</sup> See Elaine Tarone's study (1972, 1973) of intonational patterns for conversational speech among African American teens in Seattle, Washington. Tarone's study recorded recurring patterns of extending pitch ranges, a use of varied pitch contours, and a use of falling pitch contours in yes-no questions in formal situations among the subjects in ways that did not mirror the conversational speech of white teens from the same region. (33-34)

ethnicity of speakers.” (L. J. Green 124) Others such as William Labov conducted similar studies, but concluded that listeners simply recognize differences between speaker’s dialects rather than their ethnicity. That shade of disagreement is important, but begs the question of whether either group of respondents explicitly parses dialect from ethnicity or race. The assumed contiguity of sound and body represents a separate data set on which, unfortunately, Rickford does not elaborate. Listeners predicting either dialect or ethnicity demonstrate that *sounding Black* functions as a signifier in and of its self. But do important is that listeners hear prosodic difference and extrapolate essence and personhood.

Here float the essential questions concerning the politics of African American English. Throughout our history, speakers of AAE have struggled against often pejorative views concerning Black speech, and the “racist assumption that Black pidgin reflected an innate inability of Africans to learn English.” (Asante 20) Consider descriptions of how *some* Black people use language: “fluent,” “lively,” soulful,” “expressive.” Conversely, consider reactions to African Americans who do not use AAE: “putting on airs,” “sounds White,” “talks proper.” Consider Richard Pryor, as Willie the junkie, telling the audience that in order to apply for a job, he “went in there and used [his] white voice...” (Pryor) Within these examples gleam the dual edges of the blade of speech. On the one hand the listener identifies a quality of speech (dialect); on the other hand the listener identifies the quality of a person (ethnicity). The intervention of performance and racial formation theories maintain that race is a factor of behavior, not of embodied essence. Conversely, the two perceptions (quality of speech and the quality of a person) often merge, and sound stands in as an essential quality of the speaker. By this logic, Black language is not only lively and expressive, but so too are the people who use it. Or as Blackness and African American English further conflate, Black people on the whole come to be viewed as “soulful,” or as “broken,” “childish,” and “simple” regardless of their sound.

## DEFINING BLACK SONICITY

As a critical theory, Black sonicity explores the inter-textual sonic characteristic of Black cultural production. It encompasses the network of language, rhetorical traditions, and musical practices associated with African derived people, and it encompasses a range of actions between the poles of human speech and music— creoles, dialects, and languages; rhetorical styles; orature; verbalized spiritual practices; musical expression. Neither the terms music nor speech encompass all of these forms, nor do they hint at the way these forms cross pollinate. Black sonicity, on the other hand, refers to the entire matrix, and to the considerable influence they exert on one another within Black communities, and in moments of Black cultural production. Within a theory of Black sonicity, sound basks at the inter-textual crossroads of Black Atlantic cultural production.

Black sonicity theorizes a distinctly African philosophical approach which privileges sound as a fundamental generative cultural force.<sup>13</sup> The Negritude writers<sup>14</sup> were an early proponent of a similar strategic essentialism, as were many Afrocentrists theorists. Marimba Ani, for example, extends Senghor's ideas about a racial "spiritual

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Eliot Fox, for instance, hears the drum as the developmental germ of Diasporic cultural production. For Fox, the drum, rhythm, and the voice occupy the center of an originary Blackness whose "after images on the historical retina" (Black literature, Black orature, and Black speech) continue to carry its echoes. (5) As a result, Fox asserts, "the eloquence of black writing derives from the eloquence of a cultural matrix rich in verbal, gestural, musical resources" (7) Amiri Baraka identified the kernel of Black cultural production in the principle of "the changing same," a cultural continuity most easily observable in Black music through improvisation and fluidity, but one that undergirds a much wider array of cultural practices. While he does consistently link this principle to music, Baraka differs from subsequent Afrocentrists in citing an underlying principle rather than music itself as the connective fiber across Black cultural production.

<sup>14</sup> Francophone Caribbean and West African writers like Leopold Senghor and Aime Cesaire figured sound as a nearly inseparable element of Negritude, or Black "spiritual essence." Its generative force sat diametrically opposite European rationality, linearity, and intellectualism. Blackness, or Negritude, emerged from the "nocturnal heart, rhythm/ and blood of the drum," (Senghor, *New York (Jazz Orchestra: Solo Trumpet)* 157) as antithesis to the static, objective worldview of Europe, 'founded on separation and opposition: on analysis and conflict'. (L. S. Senghor, *Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century* 27) Negritude spoke of an innate predilection for intuition, empathy, balance, unity, movement and rhythm.

essence,” and argues that cultures arise based on an “ideological core,” or *asilli*.<sup>15</sup> (xxv) Within Ani’s theory of cultural development, subsequent cultural production develops as a fractal extension of the “developmental germ/seed” of a culture. From a viewpoint of artistic analysis then, the generating matrix of a cultural product must be identified in order to make sense of it.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, scholars like Paul Carter Harrison and Kariamu Welsh-Asante, in theorizing Black aesthetics, hold that many traditional West African religious systems place sound and rhythm at their ideological core. Sound provides the medium through which a community invokes “the vital spiritual force into being” (Welsh-Asante).<sup>17</sup>

The question of sound as an “ideological core,” in Black cultural production also figures in the work of philosopher Paul Gilroy. In his discussion of Black music in “Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a "Changing" Same,” Gilroy critiques what he views as a new “analytic orthodoxy” in Black studies which dismisses the reading of diverse Black cultural practices as interconnected. Gilroy contends that the idea of Diaspora must remain central to theorizations of Black identity, but can do so without operating “as essentialism, idealism, or both.” (112)

Gilroy avoids listening to music as the double helix behind Black cultural production. Instead, he approaches sound as a mechanism for understanding a range of Black cultural practices, as a place where these practices converge, as a nexus from

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<sup>15</sup> Ani’s text *Yurugu* is largely a critique of Western philosophical systems and an understanding of European colonial domination as the consequence of what Ani ascribes to a pathological “ideological core.” A biting treatment of circum-Atlantic history, the concept of *asilli* nonetheless seems to align with other proponents of racial “spiritual essence,” and an argument for foregrounding sound in critical Black studies.

<sup>16</sup> See also Jahn 164-169 and Gottschild 11-21 for further discussions of African cultural matrices.

<sup>17</sup> Harrison derives Nommo as a dramatic principle from sweeping interpretations of Bantu cosmology by anthropologist Janheine Janz. Harrison’s evocation of Ntu, Nommo, and rhythm aligns Afrocentric thought with Negritude’s theorizations on Blackness to seat sound at the table of Black aesthetic theorization.

which ideas about identity are disseminated, and a storehouse of social philosophies that influence other forms of cultural expression. Music, in particular, remains a crucial site for exploring larger issues of identity and Blackness because historically, music has been a place where Black people have constructed their own “self-identity, political culture, and grounded aesthetics.” (Gilroy 127). Therefore, similarities in the cultural products across Diasporic communities result from to a “common fund of urban experiences,” similar experiences of segregation, the “memory of slavery,” and a “legacy of Africanisms.” (116)

Gilroy’s focus on the experiences of Diasporic communities is an important distinction from Negritude’s “totalizing conception of Black culture” and its assertions of a core Africanist cultural DNA. (118) But he does not discount the potency of cultural retentions and their capacity to influence subsequent cultural products. Rather, he warns against polarization between the schools of thought when seeking to understand the position of sound and music in Black cultural theorization. On the one hand, Gilroy identifies a position of anti-essentialism (Gilroy offers Kobena Mercer as an example) wherein Blackness is completely deconstructed, ignoring the “populist affirmation” of a unity found across global Black cultures. Conversely, other theorist (Gilroy cites Nelson George, for example) argue a point of view in which music represents “the primary means to critically explore and politically reproduce the necessary “ethnic” essence of blackness.” (125) Gilroy contends that this polarization inhibits deeper theorizations, in part because the debate takes time away from valuable conversations about the music itself and its actual place in the “*habitus* of Diaspora blacks. (126)” Reminiscent of Fred Moten’s theorization of Black experiences, literatures, and performances, Gilroy offers a moderation between the essentialist and anti-essentialist poles, arguing that new cultural traditions are the product of both African retentions and a similarity of experiences through and extending from slavery. Theorists may locate, “in the breaks and interruptions” of cultural traditions, the distinction between the “transmission of a fixed essence through time,” and the “the invocation of tradition,” what Baraka called the



principle of changing same:

New "traditions" are invented in the jaws of modern experience, and new conceptions of modernity are produced in the long shadow of our enduring traditions-the African ones and the ones forged from the slave experience that the black vernacular so powerfully and actively remembers. This labor also necessitates far closer attention to the rituals of performance that provide prima facie evidence of linkage between black cultures. (126-27)

Even outside of aesthetic theory, voice and sound have historically represented important modes of cultural production and self-identification for Black people, particularly within the New World context. Lindon Barrett's *Value and Blackness* (1999) argues that critical discourses on race and value illuminate one another through the racially-heard voice. Barrett's analysis of the Black singing voice suggests that U.S. cultural logic reads race as a transactional quantity. (93) Race became a medium of exchange in the trans-Atlantic world of labor, cultural inclusion and exclusion, and the commodification of human beings and their cultural practices. Barrett argues that the New World project frames Blackness as a commodity to be expended for its economic value (through slavery, sharecropping, and wage discrimination), and for its cultural value (plantation entertainment, blackface minstrelsy, the commercialization of Black musical production, the lucrative trade of Black athletes) While the United States, in particular, remained hostile to Blackness (through segregation and miscegenation laws), it simultaneously positioned Black performance as materially valuable. Barrett argues that since the songs in the hull, the Black voice especially has held capital in the dominant society, and that over time, its potential would become a tool used to buoy African economic and cultural survival in the U.S.

A tool of resistance and self sustenance, the voice emerges in African American cultural practices as a form of contestation, as self expression, and as a source of personal and communal pleasure. In his essay "Looking for the Real Nigga: Social Scientists deconstruct the Ghetto," Robin D.G. Kelley discusses the dozens, the "verbal contest

involving any number of young black men<sup>18</sup> who compete by talking about each other's mama." (35) He notes that sociological interpretations of the dozens often miss the mark when approaching this form of Black cultural expression:

Without a concept of or even an interest in aesthetics, style, and the visceral pleasure of cultural forms, it should not be surprising that most social scientists explain black urban culture in terms of coping mechanisms, rituals, or oppositional responses to racism. And trapped by an essentialist interpretation of culture, they continue to look for that elusive "authentic" ghetto sensibility, the true, honest, unbridled, pure cultural practices that capture the raw, ruff neck "reality" of urban life." (35)

Kelley challenges sociologists who frame the dozens as ritual or a survival strategy for Black urban youth. Kelley critiques these intimations as yet another means of exoticizing Black folks. As an alternative reading, Kelley suggests that the dozens are first about having fun. It is one example of the ways in which orality, or as Barrett reads, the voice carries cultural capital within Black communities. It works to sustain human interaction, while also being mined (by entertainment executives and sociologists alike) from beyond those communities.

Black performance achieves its value without conforming to conventional avenues of cultural validation—literacy and the academy. Barrett suggests that Black music (which he reduces to "singing") challenges the supremacy of literacy. He goes on to argue that the distinctive intonation, vowel and consonant action, and rhetorical phrasing of Black voices successfully hurdle the subordinate position Black culture occupies within U.S. culture. Here we witness Black sonicity disrupting wider cultural valuations of Blackness since, within Barrett's system of binaries; this expressive presence is subject to the transactional nature of value. In essence, Barrett suggests that

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<sup>18</sup> To be clear, Kelley frames this definition by first acknowledging that "virtually all leading anthropologists, sociologists, and linguists agree that it is a black male form of ritual insult..." Kelley regularly challenges this same group for its masculinist approach to "contemporary ghetto ethnology" and from this qualifier appears to level the same critique.

there is a currency in sounding Black both within Black communities and without.

Part of the value afforded the Black voice, both as song and as speech, stems from longstanding, shared cross cultural perceptions of voice and sound. The metaphysical power of sound, and of voice by extension, resonates within both African and European discourse. African American literary theorist Hortense Spillers points out that the aural, in literature, mythology, and physiology, figures as the pathway to an inner body that is susceptible. (Spillers) Witness Odysseus and the Sirens; Claudius in his brother's garden; Milton's Eve and the whispering snake. Its metaphysical characterization may have to do with the connection between our perception, our epistemologies, and how these systems regulate our interpretation of the world. Spillers identifies hearing as the pathway to the susceptible interior, and the examples presented from Western literature attest to the sense that the aural has often represented the entryway to the pre-rational mind, or into the soul itself. As such, it made sense for the writers of Negritude, the Harlem Renaissance, and Black Arts Movements, to adopt sound as the key sensation in cultural expression.

What is more, Black sonicity suggests that the principles of Black Atlantic music, the most complex of these highly sophisticated sonic forms, have inserted themselves in non-musical cultural forms. Polyrythms, audience participation, improvisation, and dissonance erupt not only in non-musical artistic forms like literature and visual art, but we find traces of these elements in Black speech, Black hair, and even Black athletics.<sup>19</sup> The hypothesis behind my first case study asks whether this principle extends into dramatic work. In other words, do super-structural elements of the voice in Black performance—intonation and stress patterns—invoke analogous Black musical ideals in rhythm, tempo, and accentuation. Following the presumptions of the Afrocentric

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<sup>19</sup> See also *Signifyin(G), Sanctifyin', And Slam Dunking : A Reader In African American Expressive Culture* (1999) edited by Gena Dagel Caponi. This collection of essays looks at a variety of ways Blackness has been read in creative expression.

theorists, chapter four will investigate the presence of other sound-based practices in dramatic performance. I will examine August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* in order to compare the soundscape created by the actors and director Lloyd Richards to a set of musical criteria derived from Olly Wilson's and Portia Maultsby's work on conceptual frameworks of Black music. This inquiry represents an exploration of cross-genre sonic practices through what I call prosodic modeling.

### **PROSODIC MODELING**

Music theorist Olly Wilson identifies a "shared conceptual framework," a matrix of sound ideas that exist across Black music traditions for the organization of musical sound. Rather than specific reoccurring African musical retentions, Wilson hears an underlying principle of design across Black music. In this way, the cultural expressions of Havana, Sao Paulo, Lagos, and Yazoo City, while distinct, demonstrate similar propensities for communal/participatory music making, rhythmic contrast, percussivity, a density of musical events, and embodied performances. These elements coalesce into a "heterogeneous sound ideal," that is, the tendency for textural complexity and multi-vocality in Black music. As Wilson notes:

The significant role of music in sub Saharan cosmology coupled with the obvious historical-cultural connection of peoples of African descent throughout the world, suggests that all peoples within the Diaspora share common modes of musical practice. (158)

Portia Maultsby arrives at a similar conclusion in "Africanisms in African American Music." Maultsby contends that African-American musical genres are "by-products of specific contexts and time frames, each genre is distinctly African-American because it is governed by a conceptual framework. (195) In this case, authenticity refers not to a fidelity to a specific form, but rather, hinges on whether a musical genre perpetuates framework of aesthetic tenants. Wilson's and Maultsby's theses rely on a premise similar to that in Marimba Ani's *asilli* theorem of cultural development, that the

characteristics of cultural forms are determined by a core, germinating, ideological seed. Neither Wilson nor Maultsby pursue specific, macro-phonic musical retentions. Instead each is concerned with identifying the skeletal helix from which new expression is generated:

A study of African-American music from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries reveals that African retentions in African-American music can be defined as a core of conceptual approaches. Fundamental to these approaches is the axiom that music-making is conceived as a communal participatory group activity. Black people create, interpret, and experience music out of an African frame of reference... (Maultsby 205)

To support her claim, Maultsby's analysis of Black music traditions articulates reoccurring features across three centuries of African American musical forms. She organizes these features around three broad headings borrowed from ethnomusicologist Mellonee Burnim's<sup>20</sup> analysis of gospel music: *delivery style* (corporality and the physical mode of presentation), *sound quality* (the radical manipulation and juxtaposition of timbre and translation of "everyday experiences into living sound"), and *the mechanics of delivery* (improvisational, polyphonous, polychronic, polychromic, and communal)<sup>21</sup> (Maultsby 188)

Olly Wilson and Portia Maultsby demonstrate how these elements arise in blues music as well as in other forms of Black music. Therefore, with these elements isolated, my investigation seeks to understand if these principles also emerge in the stage speech of a blues playwright August Wilson? Within the dramatic work of playwright August Wilson, one finds inter-textual connections across sonic traditions even more pronounced. Wilson consciously crafts his dialogue in reference to the blues. Wilson,

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<sup>20</sup> See also Burnim 154, Bebey 115, and Keil 124.

<sup>21</sup> See Table 5 Prosodic Criteria

inspired by a Black Arts aesthetic<sup>22</sup>, delivers his work from the womb of Black music inasmuch as it springs from the font of Western dramatic literary conventions. As Sandra Shannon notes:

August Wilson traces the source of his artistic vision to 1965-the year he was introduced to the blues. Perhaps it was providence that led him to purchase a three-dollar record player and to discover among some old seventy-eights he had bought Bessie Smith's "Nobody Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine." As he listened to the record, he was inexplicably mesmerized by the emotions that Smith's sassy delivery exuded. The effect that Bessie Smith had on the then twenty-year-old Wilson was profound, for he had discovered the universal language of the blues. He had tapped into a nonverbal means of understanding the gamut of emotions locked up inside him. (16)

The first case study investigates the presence of blues technology idioms<sup>23</sup> in the structure and sound of August Wilson's dialogue *in performance*. It is necessary to qualify the last with "in performance" because within a framework of Black sonicity, the sound of the text can trump its literary materialization. Moreover, the sounding also depends upon the particular performer, and even on a particular audience. As a result, the actors tackling Wilson's texts wrestle with score and with book. Thus, the case study approaches the question of "sounding Black" through an examination of specific sonic elements supplied through voice in dramatic performance that may alternately affirm or subvert racial categories.<sup>24</sup> For this study I will rely on the framework established by

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<sup>22</sup> Harry J. Elam offers a discussion of the BAM influence on Wilson, focusing particular attention on the political stance Wilson assumes through his address to the Theater Communications Group in June, 1996 with the speech "The Ground on which I stand." (H. J. Elam 217)

<sup>23</sup> See for a discussion of "blues technologies," see Murray 96-109. Murray identifies techniques such as instrumental voices; reciprocal voicing; tonal coloration; beat syncopation; conditioned reflex; break; accompanimental riffs; riff chorus; chorus refrain stanzas; vamp; musical space vs. lyric space; and 12 bar stanza-chorus. Many of these overlap with the specific idioms to be considered in my reading of *The Piano Lesson*, refer to Table 5, Prosodic Criteria

<sup>24</sup> See also Stephen Henderson, "Saturation: Progress Report on a Theory of Black Poetry" *Black World*, 24.8 (June 1975) 4-17.

Wilson and Maultsby as a metric. The framework serves as a constant by which to gauge the proximity of dramatic elements in performance to analogous prosodic and structural elements found in black music traditions. (Refer to Table 4, Prosodic Criteria ). The intent of the experiment is to listen for ways in which Black vocality can or cannot align with commonly held conceptual frameworks of Black musical traditions. I will purposefully conduct this experiment with the performance of an August Wilson work because Wilson has repeatedly identified Black music, specifically the Blues, as the muse to his creative method. The question stands, what is so Blues about Wilson's work? Is there some sonic contiguity between the drama and the music that exceeds the written words? The approach will hopefully prove as useful with the subsequent case study as well, and offer an insight into the unique position sounding Black in dramatic performance holds in the discourse of racial authenticity

As with any discussion of race and racial characteristics, race as culture, or race as behavior, Blackness is neither absolute nor monolithic. I paint myself into a tight little corner with the idea of Black sonicity, as it assumes a fixed set of sonic tropes as its foundation. But there are always examples that undo the neatness of theory. The project of racist thinking in the West is to erect and defend homogeneity, and to ensure Blackness as a "clearly bounded, durable" public body. (Hollinger 1384-84) Racist thinking has consistently tried to tie physiology and phenotype to social behavior. In more direct terms, people are regularly judged and regulated according to an expected continuity between physiology and behavior. When the two do not synchronize, the subject is often branded as an anomaly. Yet rather than discard that which does not fit the box, why not reconsider the box itself. Such is the approach I will rely upon in the following section under the heading, Sonic Miscegenation.

### **Sonic Miscegenation**

Alexander G. Weheliye posits that Black sonicity has the potential to redefine

Blackness. In fact, his work on sound, technology, and Black music sparked my interest in this project. His work in *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (2005) argues that the ‘post-technological’ orality of twentieth century Black culture created the potential to dramatically reframe racial categorization. Weheliye suggests that the early twentieth century schism between sound and source afforded by recorded sound offered a new mode of subjectivity for Diasporic communities. (49) The most rigorous definitions of race in the trans-Atlantic era had, rested on visual markers—complexion, hair texture, bone structure.<sup>25</sup> While Black sound, musical or spoken, had long been recognized as unique, the ability to manipulate and mass produce it opened up new ways for Black people to understand themselves across vast spaces. It further demonstrated the capacity to rearrange self understanding through aesthetic choices.

Thinking through Weheliye’s ideas on sound-source separation in mediated performance, how have Black performers used the interplay of text, performer, and the production of vocal sound in live performance to manipulate Black subjectivity? In other words, how can altering the material of vocal sound (i.e. intonations, rhythms, and vowel actions) change what might conventionally be heard as a racialized sound? That manipulation comes in a variety of forms, either through broad strokes such as casting or through meticulous adjustments to the individual actor’s vocal performance. But rather than separate sound from source, as Weheliye observes, what happens when we disrupt assumed source-sound continuities? What happens when non-Black people sound Black, or when Black people sound white in one sentence, and Black in the next? Do the constructs of authenticity hold? Does Blackness expand its net?

This is where the idea of sonic miscegenation becomes a useful tool. Sonic miscegenation examines ways in which performance confronts sonic representations of

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<sup>25</sup> Race has been defined in a variety of ways across the centuries. The Greeks for example held that anyone who was not geographically Greek constituted a different race. For a more complete discussion of the history of racial definitions, see Appiah 274-287. Appiah charts how the concept has changed from race as geography to race as religion to race as phenotype.



race by transgressing essentialized racial boundaries. Moreover, sonic miscegenation is not just a rejection of the essentialist equation of biological race → behavior. Rather, it is an intentional intervention that *uses the idea of authenticity to disturb the idea of authenticity*. It does so in ways that other art forms cannot because of the seductive illusion that is dramatic performance.<sup>26</sup> Equally important, sonic miscegenation addresses the voice for its sound properties before considering its phatic and informational capacity. I use the term miscegenation to suggest the voice as an embodied amalgam of prohibitively immiscible social grouping. Voice, as a product of the always/already racialized body, represents a productive place for the intentional transgression of essentialized racial categories, and the effort to undermine those categories.

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<sup>26</sup> One of the reasons dramatic performance is so seductive in comparison to other art forms may stem from the embodied presence of the performer. Aristotle and Bharat Muni in the *Natyasastra* each theorized that imitation occupies a central position in dramatic arts. Recent discoveries in biology seem to add empirical arguments to these ancient ones, and suggest that humans are biologically compelled to project themselves when they regard human behavior, “real” or performed. Neurologists working on behavior, mimesis, and brain functions even suggest that the distinction in perception between “real” or performed actions occurs fairly late in the cognitive process. The biological imperatives to regard human behavior and experience empathy stem from the presence of mirror neurons within the brain. In a (pea)nut shell, in the late 1990s scientists working on motor neuron research discovered a set of neurons on either side of the brain that allow primates to watch others, vicariously experience the actions of others, and store the information for later use in similar situations. The discovery of mirror neurons hints at what ancient philosophers and demonstrative storytellers discovered thousands of years ago: that human beings enjoy and are good at imitating behavior. Hence, the developments in mirror neuron research are by no means new information, but in a world seeking validation through science, these advances in neuroscience offer new insights into the biological foundations of performance, empathy, inter-subjectivity and aesthetic perception.

“When we watch someone performing an action, our brains may simulate performance of the action we observe (Jeannerod, 1994). This simulation process could underpin sophisticated mental functions such as communication (Rizzolatti and Arbib, 1998), observational learning (Berger et al., 1979) and socialization (Gallese and Goldman, 1998). Thus it has a major evolutionary benefit.” (Calvo-Merino, Glaser and Grezes 1) See also Calvo-Merino et al. 1243-1249, Iacoboni and Dapretto 942-951, and Rizzolatti 419-421.

## MISCEGENATION

Miscegenation<sup>27</sup> is a term coined to describe interracial procreation, most often between Blacks and Whites.<sup>28</sup> Unlike other terms like *melting pot* and *amalgamation* that point toward cultural integration, the rhetorical and judicial manifestations of anti/miscegenation center on procreation. It is a body-centric notion, and historically it connotes a sexual transgression of significant social boundaries. The calcification of racial categories in British North America came to mean the prohibition against intermingling Black bodies and white bodies. Thus as colonial statutes became state laws, codes attempted to harden racial categories through matrilineal bloodlines.<sup>29</sup> The practice of hypodescent, the identification of bi-racial (or bi-class/bi-ethnic) individuals

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<sup>27</sup> While the term miscegenation did not erupt into the English language until the 1860s, the United States, for all its racial categorization, has always been a place of mixed progeny. Despite the prevailing doctrine of hypodescent (One-Drop Rule) interracial sex and marriage occurred with little legal restrictions in the early American colonies until 1691.

<sup>28</sup> The term was the 1863 creation of George Wakeman, and David Goodman Croly, two pro-slavery reporters for the Democratic *New York World*. Taken from the Latin *miscere* (to mix) and *genus* (kind or class, but in the scientific language of the day, race or species), Wakeman and Croly inserted the term into a pamphlet advocating the “blending” of the peoples of America, as a hoax ahead of the 1864 election. It was an effort to derail Lincoln’s re-election by fabricating a Republican endorsement of an imagined radical abolitionist desire. Lincoln won. So did the Union, but the term, ever able to incite White fears, endured. Fear of miscegenation stemmed from a fear that Whites, due to the prevailing principle of hypodescent, would disappear within a few generations. Also prevalent was the idea that entwining the genetic destiny of Europe/White America with inferior genetic makeup of Africans would be evolutionarily regressive. (Kaplan 275-79)

<sup>29</sup> 1662, Virginia colonial law established the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which identified free or slave status through the mother’s social condition. While similar to Iberian laws dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it represented a break from British common law which recognized social status as a patrilineal inheritance. (Sweet 1) The code reads:

WHEREAS some doubts have risen whether children that are slaves by birth, and by the charity and piety of their owners made partakers of the blessed sacrament of baptisme, should by vertue of their baptisme be made ffree; It is enacted and declared by this grand assembly, and the authority thereof, that the conferring of baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or ffreedom; that diverse masters, ffreed from this doubt, may more carefully endeavour the propagation of christianity by permitting children, though slaves, or those of greater growth if capable to be admitted to that sacrament. (Hening 260)

with the subordinate social group, slowly became law of the land. The one drop rule, while slightly altered in different settings, essentially held that the presence of any Black ancestors in a lineage meant the *negroization* of the subsequent lineage for four to five generations at the least. “‘I’m one-eighth African American’” is not part of the genealogical boasting that infuses American popular culture. In broader terms, it meant that Blackness was determined by parentage, rather than by behavior. As David Hollinger observes, Blackness throughout American history, has been a unique “stigma” in mainstream social discourse. (1368)

While anti-miscegenation laws sought to prohibit the intermingling of Black and white bodies, conceptually they also implied a parallel prohibition against intermingling *Blackness* and *Whiteness*. The moral and legal concerns over the actions of individual bodies centered on the way the essences of those bodies converged in the resultant progeny. Thus, the furor over inter-racialism throughout history has focused as much on the product of interracial liaisons as it has targeted the doers of the deed. The bi-racial individual both fascinated and horrified. They were at once exotic yet familiar; literally, genetically, embodying the impossible transgression of cross-racial intimacy.

Moreover, miscegenation as a term, not only invokes the derision often used to characterize cross racial sexual relations, it also invokes a theatrical tradition intimately bound to the propagation of Black vocality in the United States. In conjunction with the minstrel tradition, miscegenation tales of the nineteenth century, such as Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* (1859), or *The White Slave* (1882) by Bartley Campbell, strike a public timbre of Blackness that reverberates deep into the twentieth century. As the courtroom functioned as a primary site for the articulation of racism through the legal enforcement of anti-miscegenation laws, the American theater found important theatrical material in what Diana Paulin calls the Miscegenation Narrative.

The miscegenation narrative is a reoccurring tradition in American dramatic literature and prose. It typically includes a tragic character whose race is indeterminate just by looking at them. Sterling Brown discusses the tragic mulatto/a “Negro Character

as Seen by White Authors,” and gives some ideas about why the mixed race character became so important in U.S. literature. Brown posits that anti-slavery authors in the nineteenth century found in the tragic mulatto/a a sympathetic type for their white readership. Often mixed race characters presented anti slavery authors with the opportunity to display the “the proofs of the Negro's possibilities,” a contradiction to those who argued Africans were incapable of existing independently in Western civilization. (74) The tragic nature of the mixed race character stemmed from a “mathematical symmetry” of racial paternalism and literary creation. Brown writes:

First, the mulatto inherits the vices of both races and none of the virtues; second, any achievement of a Negro is to be attributed to the white blood in his veins. The logic runs that even inheriting the worst from whites is sufficient for achieving among Negroes. The present theses are based upon these: The mulatto is a victim of a divided inheritance; from his white blood come his intellectual strivings, his unwillingness to be a slave; from his Negro blood come his baser emotional urges, his indolence, his savagery. (76)

Brown ascribes this to a general popular sentiment that mixed race persons (which Brown was) represented an inevitable tragedy, as they "had no right to be born" in the first place. (77)

By the 1920s, the mixed race male character had fallen out of vogue. The bi/tri-racial female character (often Black, White, and Native American) became the de facto, tragic mixed race character in popular fiction and drama. As Brown notes, “Many recent novels show this: *White Girl*, *The No-Nation Girl*, *A Study in Bronze*, *Gulf Stream*, *Dark Lustre*-- all of these show luridly the melodrama of the lovely octoroon girl. Indeed "octoroon" has come to be a feminine noun in popular usage.” (76)

As the tragic “mulatta” became an increasingly popular type, she not only represented a character in which White readers might find a “common humanity,” but also became a site of exotic desire and spectacle for White male audiences. The “swarthy protégés, the quadroon or octoroon,” became the objects of traditional patriarchal representation of the female body, what Jill Dolan identifies as “representation only as a

site of male desire.” (99) Pursued by race-conscious villains, and courted by young white men. She is at once handsome and admired, yet alienated, and the narrative usually ends with the main character’s untimely death. Writers like Evans Wall, Geoffrey Barnes, and Roark Bradford portrayed their biracial heroines as sultry, lusty, and desperate for white lovers, torn between “white intellect” and “black sensuousness” to such a point that suicide becomes the only release from the paradox of their existence. Brown dubs all of this “patent absurdity,” but cites a host of works as evidence of the extent of such absurdity in the canon of American literature.<sup>30</sup>

These narratives, in line with their heroines, represent a mix of contrasting elements. They blend fantasy and revulsion, desire and disdain; they imagine the mulatta character as a tragic blend of pure whiteness and exotic Blackness. Hence, as it bridges theatrical activity and social history, American representations of interracial desire serve as a good place to examine the essence and figments surrounding racial categorization.

As Paulin notes, staging the miscegenation narrative, frames race as performative. In miscegenation narratives, Blackness and whiteness enter “in the realm of the performative” where “performativity, rather than her genetic makeup, constitutes... racial identity.” (259) It is an ironic twist given the position of federal and state judiciaries which held that race was linked to ancestry, rather than behavior. In her analysis of the play *The White Slave* (1882) by Bartley Campbell, Paulin observes the various sites where race is read in production. Within the framework of the performance, there exists a number of “different markers of Blackness and whiteness:” such as the character’s

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<sup>30</sup> Prose and dramatic works using the tragic mulatto/a figure include works such as Richard Hildreth’s *The White Slave: or Memoirs of Archy Moore*, (1836); Lydia Maria Child’s, “The Quadroons” (1842) and “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes” (1843); Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856); William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853); Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* (1859); Bartley Campbell’s *The White Slave* (1882); George Washington Cable’s *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life* (1880) and *Old Creole Days* (1883); Esther Hyman’s *A Study in Bronze* (1928); Roark Bradford’s *This Side of Jordan* (1929); Vara Caspary’s *The White Girl* (1929); Evans Wall’s *The No-Nation Girl*. (1929); Geoffrey Barnes’ *Dark Lustre* (1932); and Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* (1933).

“true” identity, the character’s lived experience, and the originating actress’s race. As the title suggests, the heroine is, through an intentional false identification as biracial at birth, thought to be ‘mulatta.’ In its original production, the title role was cast with a white actress.<sup>31</sup> (260) Playwrights like Campbell and Dion Boucicault also incorporated Blackface performance, Black music, and minstrel-esque comic relief as measures of contrasting “authenticities.” In each case, dialogue and dialect functioned as carriers of these distinctions.

What is more, Black writers in the twentieth century extended and subverted the miscegenation narrative to a variety of “progressive” ends. One in particular, Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, conscripts the tragic mulatta in an investigation of the bi-racialized inner self. Its narrative disjunction and mutability of characterization lend it to an exploration of the miscegenation narrative through the secondary Aristotelian elements of spectacle, music, and diction— elements best explored in production as opposed to on the page. Here, the script’s diction and thematic concerns choices offer an intersection of vocal sound and race. My hypothesis proposes that this intersection of sound and race becomes most clear in *Funnyhouse* when the play is read and staged as a miscegenation narrative.

### THEATER OF CRUELTY

To that end, I bring Antonin Artaud into the conversation on voice and racial authenticity because of the ways his ideas about theater reposition the voice of the actor, subverting the Aristotelian order wherein plot and character are of chief concern to the playwright.<sup>32</sup> In *Theater and its Double*, Artaud insists that the Western theater has

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<sup>31</sup> This was also true of *Pinky*, starring Jeanne Crain, and Lana Turner’s role in *Imitation of Life*.

<sup>32</sup> In *Ars Poetica*, Aristotle ranks the basic elements of drama in the following order of importance: Plot, character, thought, diction, music, and spectacle. In terms of the definitions presented in *The Poetics*, voice falls within music (melos), or more simply put, the category addressing the aural elements of drama. Thus melos includes voices, the meter and lyricity of versed text, music, and even

forgotten the true purpose of theater. It has lost the capacity to truly move the spectator. What was required was the immersion of the audience in the presence of the actor's corporeality. Consequently, Artaud's theater of cruelty sought to undermine the literary theater of his day, and replace the playwright's virtuosity with the actor-spectator relationship as the center of the theatrical event. Artaud was all about the ways bourgeoisie theater, chatty theater, failed to affect audiences because the heavy, expository nature of realism's dialogue alienated the performer's body during performance. In response, Artaud theorizes that *the voice as sound* rather than *the voice as speech* can push the theatrical experience away from entertainment and didacticism, and closer to ritual.<sup>33</sup> Beyond character, storyline, and sign, the actor's voice in Artaud's new theater, serves as a conduit of the body itself. The actor's voice publically and intentionally foregrounds what Roland Barthes calls the grain of the voice. Hence, the theater Artaud envisions relies on the unique capacity of the voice to make the body of the actor present, and to serve as the vehicle for inducing affect in the spectator:

It is in order to attack the spectator's sensibility on all sides that we advocate a revolving spectacle which, instead of making the stage and auditorium two closed worlds, without possible communication, spreads its visual and sonorous outbursts over the entire mass of the spectators. (86)

The nature of sound lends itself to immersing the audience in the performance.

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sound FX. Diction (lexis) conversely refers to "speech" in the sense of what has been written rather than how it is uttered. In *Rhetoric* however, Aristotle positions voice as a rhetorical element addressing the "proper method of delivery" of an argument. Here he connects the material spoken with how it is spoken, that is, tying the significance of language choice, character, and mood to tone, pitch, and rate of speech. (17)

<sup>33</sup> Concurrently, as Helga Finter observes, this movement back to the mystical roots of theater entails a shift from the fictional to the Real, in the Lacanian sense, as what Artaud sought to stage, from glossalalia to the scream represented attempts to circumvent language and resist symbolization. (48) The Real, i.e. corporeality and its attending quality of mortality, lend an "authenticating" hand to the theatrical event. Rather than perpetuate the notion of theatre as representation, Artaud wanted to deploy the real, the corporeal, the dangerous, and the sensual to replace the symbolic. Terror and pain, rather than the dreaded willing suspension of disbelief would function as the "means of entering the affective memory of the spectator." (51)

As Denis Hollier remarks, “Artaud's ultimate cathartic sound effect... occurs when the spectator feels surrounded to the point of surrendering.” (166) Film historians, in discussing the transition from silent films to talkies, often note the distinction between the linearity of the visual and pervasiveness of the aural. But even in the theater where source and sound are synchronous, the aural takes on a ubiquity like no other theatrical element. The range of aurality stems from the physics of sound and from the physiology of hearing, each of which entail a tactility absent in visual perception. The process of actor-voice-sound-hearing in its simplest description is that of emotion/thought moving the body, the body moving the air, the air moving a second body, and the receiving body perceiving emotion/thought. As a result, sound, and specifically vocal sound, fits Artaud's mandate for bodily connection between audience and performer within the theatrical event. He notes:

*In this spectacle, the sonorisation is constant: sounds, noises, cries are chosen first for their vibratory quality, then for what they represent.* (81)

The traditional Western theater against which Artaud pushes, privileges rational language. It is a theater reliant on informational speech to convey plot and story. From Artaud's viewpoint, conventions of the day asked that the voice serve only to perpetuate literariness in Western theater which, by curtain call, failed to realize the spiritual potential of artistic expression. Artaud, on the other hand, advocates voices that overwhelm the senses, and bypass the firewall of decorum, convention, and symbolic language. Here we find an actor's voice which has no intent to create character, to function as “vocal personae or masks.” Rather than use voice as a medium for plot and character, Artaud sought to make the theater experience real— even medicinal— by teaching actors to scream and otherwise overwhelm the spectator. The aim was to erase the distance between watchers and watched, and to offer the spectator a truly moving experience on a *pre-rational level* by assaulting the rational mind with un-signified stimuli.

As Hortense Spillers points out, audition in the Western literary imagination



represents a significant entryway to the *susceptible interior*. The auditory process, neurologically speaking, is by no means uniquely pre-rational (unlike the olfactory system, audition is not at all physiologically pre-cognitive.)<sup>34</sup> Still, Spiller's assertion is not solely the product of myth and art. Western discourses in epistemology regularly align the aural with pre-rationality as a foil to visual rationality and the "hegemony of vision."<sup>35</sup> But the aural occupies a unique position that can often challenge the hegemony of vision. Maurice Wallace, for instance, meditates on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s voice, and the relationship of the silent photographic iconography of the King era to the aural legacy surrounding him—his vibrato, the ambient sounds of the era, the spirituals that come to mind (or to screen) when he is remembered. The distinctiveness of these aural elements suggests that, at times, they have the capacity to "overwhelm the ontology of sight" (R. Wallace)

Similarly, Lindon Barrett marks the distinction between the signing voice and the singing voice. The signing voice is the speaking voice, and the data stream focused on transmitting information through signs (words, morphemes, phonemes). The auditor receives the sentence, phrase, or monologue and processes the information as a matter of rational communication. The singing voice, Barrett argues, can affect the listener in a

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<sup>34</sup> *The neurology of smell*: The oldest and least sophisticated of the five senses, unlike the visual, tactile, auditory, and gustatory systems, the neural pathways of the olfactory system that largely bypass the processing stations (thalamus) in the nervous system, and connect most immediately to cortical tissue.

<sup>35</sup> Robyn Wiegman interrogates this tradition in an analysis of race, Western science, and models of ocularity. Wiegman writes: "...the visible has achieved a complicated methodological primacy since the late Renaissance, though it is toward the radically different notions of vision and visibility and of the body and "being" within this period that my conversation will turn." (22) Interestingly, Wiegman argues that our contemporary understanding of race is as much a result of a shift in Western science and how to perceive the world, as it was due to an encounter between phenotypically different peoples. The Enlightenment moved away from scriptural understandings of the universe toward humanism and beyond. Western epistemological systems folded human beings into the natural world, and into the basket of things to catalogue and observe. Consequently, rationalized vision set mathematical vision as the basis of Western science; it relied upon "the authority of a singular eye" that was a dispassionate, disembodied, distanced, and recorder of data. Eventually, the visual proved insufficient to science, and inadequate in defining race. Ironically, science soon discovered that it too needed to venture into the susceptible interior, beyond the visible (binocular physiology) to the invisible (the monocular & microscopic) to discover truth.

pre-significatory way. When a listener (a non-musician, at least) hears a vocalist perform, the listener does not process wavelength, key shifts, beats per second, lifts in inflection, pitch, or expulsive volume as individual units of meaning. Rather, the listener experiences the sound, often without unraveling its anatomy.

One might even argue that some sonic processes of speech and audition function libidinally. Alan Weiss argues that Artaudian Poetics operates “beneath the thresholds” of speech, and reverberates “in the sensate body” to produce its effect. Weiss observes:

The pleasures of speech are not merely phatic, communicative, seductive, but also autoerotic; the oral play of sensations, the very grain of the voice, creates and indicates the various pleasures and displeasures of vocal acts of expression... Spoken sounds have a primary libidinal value, for both speaker and (through identificatory introjection) auditor, before ever becoming meaningful: rhythm, harmony, euphony, even dissonance and cacophony have a passionate, often erotic, quality. (156) <sup>36</sup>

Denis Hollier similarly identifies libidinal value in vocality specific to theatrical and filmic environments. Hollier uses the term *phonic disarticulation* to describe the process by which unconventional production and reception of sound exploits non-lexical communication to represent thought and desire. (159) Speech, then, in the journey toward full meaning, first asserts itself as *Melos*, or song/melody, before becoming intelligible as *Lexis* (diction/dialogue).

For Artaud, the theater was the only environment capable of such a process. Never a place for entertainment, the stage was a Laboratory of Consciousness. His explorations into the inner self of the actor and his visceral connection to the spectator left the external false reality as a secondary spectacular concern. The pursuit of the truths that lay deep inside of the individual conflicted with early realist concerns over recreating the looks of the world outside of the theater.

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<sup>36</sup> Kristin Linklater advises performers to remember “voice, before speech” in her essay “Vox Eroticus.” Linklater notes that performers and public speakers do their craft a disservice when they neglect the experiential value of vocalization.

Yet this complex intersection in Artaud's theories —a devaluation of the surface while calling for a centrality of the body-- are where my questions return to ideas of race in performance. If the interior is where truth, life, the soul persist, in what ways does the surface, in this case the phenotype, belie that inner truth, particularly in conjunction with voice? After all, if voice makes the body present in performance, *what body* is being made present? Most to the point, what body is being made present through voice when the voice has a racial significance different from that which is visually signified by the body on stage?

Voice in Theater of Cruelty is pre-rational, or at best, beneath the threshold of language, (as with glossolalia and the scream). At the same time, prosody, which tends to color rather than determine lexical and semantic meaning in most Western languages, is precisely where researchers find critical mass for sounding Black. Importantly, then, the question arises: does the reception of prosody as racialized vocal sound also occur beneath the rational threshold? Might the Blackness of tongue, operate along the lines Weiss uses to characterizes Artaud's glossolalia, that is as "pure materiality, the realm of pure sound, where there obtains a total disjunction of signifier and signified?" (Weiss 152) If so how can that process subvert narrow assumptions about racial identity?

In her discussion of Richard Pryor's comedic work, Glenda Carpio, reminds us that the cornerstone of Artaud's theater of cruelty was overwhelming the audience with a pre-rational experience. Yet while theater of cruelty does involve an assault of the senses, its end is not the assault, but rather with how one must utilize the post-shock moment. Carpio suggests that in the work of artists of color, what needs to occur in that post-shock moment is clear. In discussing Pryor's *Live and Smoking*<sup>37</sup> performance, which straddles the line between performance art and stand-up, Carpio answers quite definitively: "you bite racism in the ass." (Carpio) Can an understanding in Theater of Cruelty then

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<sup>37</sup> Live and Smoking. By Richard Pryor. Dir. Michael Blum. Perf. Richard Pryor. New York City Improv, New York. 29 April 1971

investigate the essentialism racism imposes on individual identity? Sonic miscegenation represents a foray into the place where Artaud's ideas of voice and body converge with racial formation theory and the theory of Black sonicity. Sonic miscegenation considers shifting conventional forms of phenotype and racialized sound categories in order to test the reliability of racial categorization.

The text of *Funnyhouse* is characterized by conflicting linguistic structures that mark the gulf between the protagonist's inner voices—between “The Negro” and Whiteness, between the jungle and the room, between the revolutionary and the classical. The staging challenge lies in translating a “multi-voiced nexus of subtle conflicts and purported confluences” from the page with clarity. (Artaud 116) This production employed a specific voicing convention through its use of multiple phonic schemes for each individual actor in order to externalize Sarah's fragmentary, racialized inner reality. Is it possible to read Sarah's torment as an agonal, multi-voiced verbal performance? Does the juxtaposing of racial phenotype with racial sono-type amount to an assault on the spectator's reception? Investigating *Funnyhouse* through the lens Artaud provides a critical theory for asking these questions, a way of drawing new meaning from the staging approaches used in this production.

## Structure

I have divided this project into a number of binaries, though throughout the paper, I critique that kind of limiting construction. The first two chapters explore the notion of sounding black in performance from an historical perspective. Chapter two looks at the tradition of what Dreux Carpenter dubs Audio Blackface, the blackface minstrelsy of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and its purely audile extension through the radio show “Amos ‘n’ Andy.” The chapter then looks back on the Black classical traditions, the politics of diction enjoined through concert spirituals, the “genteel performance” of the Black Elite, and the vocal theory of Frederick Douglas, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Alain

Locke.<sup>38</sup> Chapter three then listens to the twentieth century responses to the minstrel image through the New Negro theater makers of the Harlem Renaissance. The chapter closes by examining the aesthetic movements of the 1960s, the root soil of both Kennedy and Wilson, and the Black Arts vocal theory that influenced each writer in separate ways. The ensuing chapters examine productions where theater artists push against and roll amid the issues of voice and identity raised across Black theater history. In each period, I listen to how performance crowns and disseminates models of Black vocality, and how dramatic performances function as a significant means by which the meaning of race proliferates.

Chapter four will then focus on an analysis of the 1995 television production of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, listening for the often mentioned Blues aesthetic in the production's vocal and musical soundscape. Chapter five surveys my own production of Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and delves into the production's subversion of racial voice-racial body alignments. Finally Chapter six reflects on the politics of sound, on stage, in politics, and in life.

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<sup>38</sup> I address Locke and Du Bois in the section on Black Classism, though Locke in particular is most often associated with the New Negro movement. Yet these two philosophers were a generation beyond the young writers and players of the Renaissance, intellectual godfathers, if you will. I address their key commentaries on Black vocality in chapter two and return to them periodically throughout chapter three.

## CHAPTER 2, AUDIO BLACKFACE AND BLACK CLASSICISM

### Audio Blackface

Black vocal traditions in the United States during the nineteenth century included a wide range of practices from music (as found in African American spiritual practices, emerging blues and jazz music, and the concert spiritual) to oratorical practices (of clergy men, abolitionists, and other Black public speakers), from dramatic performers (both classical and contemporary) to an array of regional dialects . “Sounding Black,” conversely, emerged as a distinct dramatic element in the United States during the early nineteenth century through blackface minstrelsy.<sup>39</sup> To be sure, the sound perpetuated by minstrelsy was a parody of an imagined monolithic Black vocality, though some Black vocal traditions (Spirituals, homiletics, and jazz in particular), as separate from sounding Black through minstrelsy, would eventually incorporate themselves into the minstrel form. Initially, blackface minstrelsy was performed by Whites in parody of Black vocality. As W.T. Lhamon, Jr. suggests, blackface minstrelsy represents a White fascination with Blackness rather than a depiction of Blackness. (276-77) It presented demeaning characterizations of Black people to its contemporary audiences rather than portraits of actual Black life.

Importantly, those characterizations, couched in voice and language, persisted through twentieth century American theatrical activity, and beyond into radio, television and film. In so doing, this tradition of what Dreux Carpenter calls *Audio blackface*— the grotesque vocal invention of Blackness, returned time and again to the question of

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<sup>39</sup> Blackface minstrelsy is the form using burnt cork to blacken the face and was performed by both Whites and African Americans. Here I follow Anne Marie Bean’s distinction of Black minstrelsy (minstrelsy performed by African Americans) and White minstrelsy (minstrelsy performed by whites). Note: The term minstrel does not always reference blackface traditions. Prior to the nineteenth century the term referred to singers often employed by royalty and aristocrats, or to travelling bards.

authenticity, even as Black minstrelsy (blackface minstrelsy by African American performers) asserted itself at the turn of the century.

### THE MINSTREL TRADITION

In the mid nineteenth century, working class Whites in the U.S. began to imitate Black music for their own entertainment. Blackface acts had been a part of para-theatrical entertainments (sideshows and circuses) since pre-independence times. Blackface minstrelsy as a unique theatrical form, however, emerged in the 1820s.<sup>40</sup> According to the lore, Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice, a ship's carver from New York's seventh ward, observed an enslaved African performing a shuffling dance step. Inspired, Rice *borrowed* the dance, darkened his own face with burnt cork, found himself a ragged set of clothes, and began performing "Jump Jim Crow" as a travelling stage act. Others imitated the imitator. In 1843, Dan Emmett's Virginia Minstrels offered an entire evening of "blackface variety entertainment" at the Bowery Amphitheatre in New York City. A genre was born, and not long after Rice began performing in blackface, African Americans also began performing blackface minstrelsy, clad in burnt cork make up. Charles Hicks was one of the earliest Black blackface performers to gain repute. Hicks began his minstrelsy career as a manager for the Brooks and Clayton Georgia Minstrels in the mid 1850s, before organizing his own troupe of eight performers in 1866. Hicks found success in the US and in Europe, and eventually sold the troupe to Charles Callender after returning to the states in 1875. (Sampson 58)

Language, "Negro dialect," and the distortion of Black idioms, were integral to

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<sup>40</sup> Just as popular was the burlesque lecture which also turned on caricatures of dialect. Significantly, several pre-minstrel sources of this tradition-- burlesque sermon, lecture parody, mock political oration-- root the burlesque lecture and minstrelsy in the English comic stage. In fact, the visual aspect of Blackface convention may extend back to medieval Christmas pageants and pantomimes. William Mahar's *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* includes excerpts from these various subgenres.

blackface performances.<sup>41</sup> It was, in fact, the comedic fuel of the minstrel form. Take the opening sequence, for example. The typical minstrel format included three distinct parts, the Minstrel Line, the olio, and the Afterpiece or One-Act Musical. During the minstrel line, two comic characters—Tambo and Bones— lampooned a third, the Interlocutor. The Interlocutor functions as the “straight man” in the comedic formula. The tenor of their lampoon and the Interlocutor’s comic quality stem from the fact that he apes<sup>42</sup> “White” sound (read as using extravagant language, fully voiced final consonants, and broad vowels).<sup>43</sup> As the butt of the end men’s jokes, the Interlocutor becomes a ludicrous element and an object of derision. As Michael Pickering suggests in his

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<sup>41</sup> American theater developed other dialect based comic characters whose approach to language marked their difference as cultural and intellectual deficient. Stock Native American and Irish characters, as well as working class Anglo roughnecks like Mose the Fireboy, were each made distinct through affectations of dialect.

<sup>42</sup> Word choice here is intentional. See Louis Chude-Sokei’s discussion of the “trope of the ape” in his analysis of Bert Williams. Due to the primate’s human resemblance, nineteenth century science produced a body of scholarship that closely examined the distinctions between ape and humans. Racial pseudo science then produced a body of scholarship that inserted those distinctions along racial lines, and as an offshoot, created a category of investigation dedicated to the forensics of racial authenticity. Chude-Sokei revisits Houston Baker’s use of early 20th century naturalism as a lens and metaphor to connect minstrelsy, West Indian immigration to Harlem, and 1920’s Black modernism. Mimicry, (sonic, visual, and cultural) serves as the spoke to his theoretical wheel. Where Baker riffs on Charlie Parker via ornithology, Chude-Sokei riffs a different path from the naturalist impetus: primitivism, the trope of the ape, as a site of mimicry and racial performance. His reading of Baker’s “history of racial signifying via the complex history and trope of the ape” finds Baker undermining the idea of authenticity as “natural,” suggesting instead that, in the land before human social constructs, mimicry and artifice is the rule. (83)

<sup>43</sup> An example of minstrel dialect from **Error! Reference source not found.:**

**INTERLOCUTOR.** I say, Bones, were you ever in love?

**BONES.** I wasn't nothin' else, old hoss.

**INTERLOCUTOR.** What kind of a girl was she?

**BONES.** She was highly polished; yes, indeed. Her fadder was a varnish-maker, and, what's better still, she was devoted to her own sweet Pomp.

**INTERLOCUTOR.** What do you mean by that? She must have been a spicy girl.

**BONES.** Yes, dat's de reason she was so fond of me. She was a poickess, too.

**INTERLOCUTOR.** A poetess, you mean.

**BONES.** Yes, she used to write verses for de newspapers

**INTERLOCUTOR.** Is that so, Bones?

**BONES.** Yes, saw.



analysis of blackface minstrelsy in Britain, the Interlocutor represents “a personification of absurd Black social aspirations, haplessly mangling polite discourse, or, without his make-up, as an emblem of White *embourgeoisement*.” In other words, the Interlocutor becomes “evidence” of Black people’s inability to adapt to freedom—they cannot even manage the language. (16) The resulting comedic formula spans two poles. On one end, it places an exaggerated perversion of Black colloquial speech: the awkwardly devoiced final consonants, clipped vowels, superfluous suffixes, and invented words of the end men. On the other end sits the absurdity of crisp diction on Black lips. With that, the minstrel show would frame “sounding Black” in the public imagination of the nineteenth century. They are also the poles that characterize the popular radio program The “Amos ‘n’ Andy” *Show*.

#### **“AMOS ‘N’ ANDY”**

The radio program “Amos ‘n’ Andy” extended the nineteenth century minstrel tradition of White men impersonating Black people beyond the vaudeville theatrical setting and into twentieth century mediated entertainment. In the mid 1920s, Freeman Fisher Gosden of Richmond, Virginia<sup>44</sup> and Charles James Correll of Peoria, Illinois met while working at the Joe Bren Company in Chicago. As Bren employees, the two aspiring performers produced minstrel shows across the country as fundraisers for small community organizations. They soon collaborated on a “song and chatter” act of their own. Their project was to be a “radio comic strip” in the blackface vaudevillian tradition. The duo first aired their collaboration on Chicago’s WGN station on January 12, 1926 under the name “Sam ‘n’ Henry.” Two years later, Gosden and Correll moved the program to rival station WMAQ, and due to clauses in their contract with WGN, had to change the name of the program. The new act, “The Amos ‘n’ Andy Show,” aired on

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<sup>44</sup> Martin Ely, in his study of the show, cites the close childhood friendship Gosden with Garrett Brown, an African American young man, as an indication of Gosden’s “native” bidialecticism.

March 19, 1928.

The show centered on two immigrants from the South, Amos Jones and Andy Brown, newly arrived to Chicago's south side.<sup>45</sup> The episodic plot followed the two African American characters through their lighthearted adventures in the big city. As a precursor to the television sitcom, the show featured a variety of characters and comic situations without ever disturbing the topic of mid century race relations. For millions of listeners both Black and White, "The Amos 'n' Andy Show" was a regular escape from the turmoil of Depression era demographic shifts, economic depression, and war.<sup>46</sup>

Still, its avoidance of race remains ironic. Gosden and Correll were White. The characters they voiced, however, were Black. The main characters (Amos, Andy, and "Kingfish" Stevens) each spoke an other-than-standard-American dialect. I skirt around this point, because whether or not Gosden and Correll used African American English is a point of debate in the scholarship surrounding the show.<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth McLeod, for

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<sup>45</sup> In the original series the story is set in Chicago. After the move to NBC, and the expansion of listeners to a national market, Gosden and Correll relocated the characters to Harlem.

<sup>46</sup> Between the end of the Civil War and 1890, only about 10% of African Americans in the United States lived North of the Mason Dixon line, their numbers comprising one third of the old South's total population. But from 1890 to 1900, some 200,000 people moved to cities in the North and West, and by the close of World War I, it is estimated that over half a million Black folks had left the treacherous shoals of the South for clearer harbors in Los Angeles, Denver, Baltimore, Chicago, New York City, Washington DC, Newark, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and other cities. Many who remained in the South made similar moves to larger urban settings like Atlanta, Memphis, Jackson, Dallas, Ft Worth, Charlotte, Houston, Richmond, Shreveport, and St. Louis. The Great Migration created a dramatic shift in the geographic locus of Black America, affecting the economic development and cultural production of African Americans. (Henri 63-5) For more details on the Great Migration, see Florette Henri's *Black Migration: Movement North, 1900-1920, The Road from Myth to Man* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1975.)

<sup>47</sup> Briefly, Lisa Green identifies the following segmental qualities as reoccurring characteristics of African American English: Consonant sounds: Consonant cluster reduction; Devoicing final consonant sounds; sound pattern substitution [t] or [d] and [f] or [v] for [θ], liquid vocalization of [r] and [l], sound pattern substitution [n] for [ŋ], and [skr] for [str] in syllable initial position. Vowel sounds: diphthong [oɪ] for – [oa], and lowering of the [ɛɹ]. Green also identifies the following super-segmental features as characteristics commonly found in AAE: intonational contours: level or falling tones in questions, syllable initial stress pattern: fore-stressing of bisyllabic words. See Tables 3 and 4 in the Appendix for examples of these characteristics of AAE.

instance, argues that as writers, Gosden and Correll were remarkably precise in their recreation of AAE. She writes:

Critics of Amos 'n' Andy frequently count the "mangling of English grammar" by the program's characters as one of their leading complaints against the series. However, a careful examination of the language used in the original 1930s radio scripts reveals that, far from being a crude, random mangling of grammar for comic effect, the language used by Correll and Gosden in fact displayed an awareness of specific and clearly defined linguistic rules: the rules of a form of speech commonly referred to by linguists as "African American Vernacular English," "Black English Vernacular," or simply Black English. (87)

McLeod holds that Gosden and Correll scripted accurate imitations of AAE. (37)<sup>48</sup> Gosden and Correll wrote their dialogue phonetically, and as a result, the scripts serve as a valuable record of the relative accuracy supplement to the broadcast. McLeod then uses the record to identify a number of grammatical and phonological traits that correspond to rules and figures in AAE.

McLeod offers strong evidence to show how accurate Gosden and Correll were in their execution of what has been catalogued as AAE. Her analysis responds to charges that the show was little more than a mangle of English grammar, pawning off inauthentic Black speech for the real thing. Discrepancies remain with regard to grammatical rules, as neither Green, Baugh, or Smitherman include the hypercorrections (e.g. "regusted") or use of the auxiliary "is" (e.g. "We is got it," "Is you got it?") McLeod cites. While McLeod demonstrates a frequent structural adherence to the rules of AAE, her analysis fails to consider how the larger dynamic of language—"faulty grammar" (faulty by SA or AAE measures), mispronunciations, and malapropisms—and the corresponding characterizations found in the show undermine AAE as a "recognized dialect of English

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<sup>48</sup> See Figure 1 Phonological Imitations of AAE in Amos & Andy and Figure 2 Grammatical Imitations of AAE in Amos & Andy.

shaped by clearly defined grammatical and phonological rules.”<sup>49</sup> (88) McLeod holds that hypercorrection and malapropisms are “not without precedent” in AAE, and accepts them as a systemic feature. Yet the research provided by Baugh, Green, Rickford, Smitherman, or Labov seems to support this assertion. As the signature characteristics of the title characters on the only “Black” prime time program of the era, such an analysis frames these denigrations as representative of the whole. In other words, the program tended to wed the “grammatical and phonological rules” of AAE not only to faulty grammar (faulty by SA *or* AAE measures), but also to the old standards of stereotypic Blackness— illiteracy, shiftlessness, cowardice, to belligerent women and cowed men. These associations were amplified considering the way Correll and Gosden made class distinctions in their use of AAE. Standard English style was reserved for “educated characters” like William Taylor, Ruby Taylor and Lawyer Collins. (McElroy 92) Yet even these characters, painted as unethical and ill-qualified, simply filled the Interlocutor’s shoes and further hinted at the absurdity of Black middle class aspirations.

Additionally, we must always remember that McLeod is analyzing *The “Amos ‘n’ Andy” Show* as a radio program, not its television format. All of these negative elements were wrapped up and transmitted sonically through the performers’ voices. As such, they were received into the susceptible interior as a package deal. That is, the sounds associated with AAE— *stopped initial fricatives, post vocalic absence* and other vocal actions— came to signify both the vocal sound of Black bodies, *and* the negative stereotypes assigned to Blackness.

Finally, the response of portions of the Black community are equally telling of the role voice has historically played in racial identification. Many African Americans rejected the linguistic portrayals by Gosden and Correll as inauthentic Black speech. Witness the letters of Bishop W. J. Walls to *Abbotts Monthly* (Dec 1930), the national

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<sup>49</sup> Substitution of “l” sounds for “s” e.g. “propolition” for “proposition” for example, or the substitution of prefixes as in “regusted” for the word “disgusted”

protest launched by Robert Lee Vann and the *Pittsburg Courier* in 1931, or the NAACP bulletins from 1951.<sup>50</sup> To a large extent, these denunciations of the series were as much refutations of extra-phonological baggage, as they were challenges on the grounds of sonic authenticity. Many within Black communities felt that the version of Black vocality offered by *The “Amos ‘n’ Andy” Show* was not only offensive, but far too narrow to encompass African American subjectivity.

Regardless of any similarities between the Blackness of tongue found in some Black communities and that enacted by Correll and Gosden, the program’s dialect, both its characteristics and its use, derived from blackface minstrelsy.<sup>51</sup> Both Correll and Gosden had been minstrel performers and producers of blackface entertainments. Whether, as Eric Lott argues, the intent of minstrelsy was not to demean Black identity, for many, it demeaned through its associations.<sup>52</sup> It equated Black vocality with the

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<sup>50</sup> See for example editorials by Bishop W. J. Walls, December 1930, in *Abbotts Monthly*, or by Robert L. Vann, 1931, in the *Pittsburg Courier*. The NAACP also published a Bulletin, August 15, 1951 denouncing the television program:

It tends to strengthen the conclusion among uninformed and prejudiced people that Negroes are inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest.

Every character in this one and only TV show with an all Negro cast is either a clown or a crook.

Negro doctors are shown as quacks and thieves.

Negro lawyers are shown as slippery cowards, ignorant of their profession and without ethics.

Negro Women are shown as cackling, screaming shrews, in big mouthed close-ups, using street slang, just short of vulgarity

All Negroes are shown as dodging work of any kind.

Millions of white Americans see this Amos 'n' Andy picture of Negroes and think the entire race is the same. (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)

<sup>51</sup> The franchise was steeped in the conventions of Blackface minstrelsy. Its advertisements regularly depicted Gosden and Correll in blackface makeup.

<sup>52</sup> Eric Lott holds that minstrelsy functioned as a way for Whites to identify themselves as subversive, blue collar, and primordially American. Lott suggests that, while offensive, minstrel performances were not constructed in order to ridicule Blacks. He argues: “[minstrelsy was] a white working-class attempt to criticize and resist dominant white middle-class power by affiliating themselves through minstrelsy with African American working-class culture. If one accepts it, this is a rare but not singular historical instance of whites sincerely attempting to pass as blacks who represented a subversive

laughable, the ignorant, the sentimental, and the ludicrous.

Despite persistent Black opposition to “The Amos ‘n’ Andy Show”, the show evolved into one of the most successful entertainment franchises of the pre and post war era. And it did so with significant Black listenership. For some, the show presented, at least nominally, Black characters when there was little Black presence on prime-time radio.<sup>53</sup>

In August of 1929, the program changed affiliations again, this time moving to NBC as a nightly fifteen minutes program, six nights a week. In the 1940s, the program

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cultural authority and a romanticized primordial American authenticity.” (Lott, *Blackface and Blackness: The Minstrel Show in American Culture*)

<sup>53</sup> From the onset, the producers of “Amos ‘n’ Andy” seemed somewhat concerned over the reception of the show among Black audiences. Correll, Gosden, and NBC launched a wide scale public relations campaign in 1930 to win the approval of black communities, particularly in Chicago and New York. The producers collaborated with the Chicago Tribune, the Chicago Daily News, and the Urban League, to arrange appearances of Correll and Gosden in Chicago’s African American communities. They even went so far as book live performances at the Regal Theater where Gosden recalls an exclusively “colored” audience and “such an ovation from the packed house that we didn’t know what to do.” (For Gosden’s reflections on the 1930 Chicago campaign, see the interview by Mark Quest entitled, “Private Lives of Amos n Andy,” in the February 1930 edition of *Radio Digest*.)

Elizabeth McLeod, Bart Andrews, and Ahrgus Julliard each address the specific question of “Amos ‘n’ Andy’s” popularity among African American audiences in their respective works. McLeod cites a 1928 straw poll survey of members of the Chicago Urban League undertaken to gauge reception of the radio show among some African American audiences, offering favorable reviews among those polled. (127) She also cites a number of the letters written to *Radio Digest* in the early months 1930 and a series of interviews conducted by A.W. Clarke. *Radio Digest* sent Clarke to interview African Americans in Harlem and Hartford, CT about the show, and published the interviews in the magazine’s August 1930 issue. The interviews published included responses rejecting the show as demeaning, alongside others that suggest that Black support of the show was not uncommon. (128-130) Bart Andrews and Ahrgus Julliard assert that “despite the declining radio audience, “Amos ‘n’ Andy” was still the most popular radio show of the period, among whites and, according to polls, blacks.” (33). To be sure, polls such as that taken though the Urban League, were narrowly conducted, and among populations connected to the public relations campaigns led by the show’s producers. A broader source of opinions lay in the letters to the editors of Black newspapers from around the country (e.g. *Baltimore Afro-American*, *St Louis Post Dispatch*, and *Chicago Daily News*, and *Pittsburgh Courier*, in particular) These letters do reflect a diversity of opinion, and the vitality of the debate over “Amos ‘n’ Andy.” Importantly these letters and anecdotes suggest that the debate over Black representation in media did not emerge post Civil Rights Movement, but rather, was an immediate reaction contemporaneous with the show’s debut. See also the *Baltimore Afro-American* February 22, 1930. *St Louis Post Dispatch* February 21, 1930. *Chicago Daily News*, February 25, March 7 and 19, 1928, in particular.

became a half-hour weekly radio sitcom. It was one of network radio's first super successes, garnering NBC a huge Pepsodent toothpaste sponsorship, and earning Correll and Gosden \$100,000 a year. Its success would continue, despite controversy and protest. In 1948 Correll and Gosden sold the rights to "Amos 'n' Andy" to CBS for \$2.5 million, and joined the CBS payroll as principle actors on the series. The program spun off into print, film (with Correll and Gosden in blackface make-up), and in the mid-1950s, into a TV sitcom with an African American cast. In the end, the program remained an American radio standard until November 25, 1960. While the televised sitcom only lasted two seasons, it continued in syndication into the 1970s.

Rice, Correll, and Gosden were only a few in a long line of non-Black performers who have co-opted Black vocality not in honorific imitation, but in order to get paid. In April 1930 writer and Broadway veteran Flournoy Miller (of the comedy act "Miller and Lyles") threatened legal action against NBC, Gosden and Correll over the appropriation of comedic material. Interestingly, the material in question is verbal shtick. In the suit, Miller lists several of the malapropisms that Miller and Lyles had used throughout their vaudeville acts of the 1920s— 'routinin' [writing], 'mulsifyin' [multiplying], "I'se regusted," and "It all depends on de sitch-ation yo' is in." Neither Miller nor Lyles appear to have followed through with the lawsuit. (McLeod 56)

Today's music industry continues to be rife with examples from Elvis Presley to Justin Timberlake. But dramatic performance, live and mediated has had its share as well. The question over the accuracy of dialect in "Amos 'n' Andy" is significant to any discourse over Black vocality in performance. But equally as important, is acknowledging this commodification of Black vocality, and recognizing that the commodified representation looms, always threatening to stand in as representative of the whole. This is the cloud that hangs over every the Black actor, from James Hewlett (1778-1836), to Spencer Williams (1893-1969) to Nelsan Ellis (1978-present) In fact, critical responses to the show recall previous protests over characterizations of minstrelsy. Black people had been battling over voice as a site of racial contestation and

identity long before 1929. As we oscillate between the idea of identifiable Black sound (Black sonicity) and the diversity of Black experiences (sonic miscegenation), I again want to channel E. Patrick Johnson, and challenge the very idea of *a* genuine African American speech pattern. But I also want to critique the idea of genuineness without discounting the premise of Blackness as an important, strategic essentialism in the stewardship of representations of Black identity.

### Black Classicism<sup>54</sup>

*listening to*

#### **“BECAUSE WHITE PEOPLE ARE ~~LOOKING AT~~ YOU”**

The century from 1840 to 1940 is a fascinating era for the study of sound and vocality in performance. Part of its intrigue lies in the irony of its sound record: the bulk of it is written rather than phonographically recorded.<sup>55</sup> Yet the “record” of sound across the century is remarkably telling, particularly on the significance of sound in issues of race and ethnicity. During the period, vocal identity was the concern not only of writing in the theater, but also the subject of social interaction beyond the stage.

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<sup>54</sup> Black classicism refers to a long literary, musical, philosophical, and dramatic tradition among African American communities engaging Greek, Roman, and classical European cultural forms. Important figures in the canon of Black Classicism include poet Phyllis Wheatley, thespians James Hewitt and Ira Aldridge, concert vocalist Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, and classics scholar William Sanders Scarborough. See also Tracey Lorraine Walters, *African American literature and the classicist tradition : Black women writers from Wheatley to Morrison* (New York: Macmillan, 2007); Patrice D. Rankine, *Ulysses in Black : Ralph Ellison, classicism, and African American literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable : A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1984); Jo A. Tanner’s *Dusky Maidens: The Odyssey of the Early Black Dramatic Actress* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992); Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock’s *Ira Aldridge: the Negro Tragedian*. (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1993); and *The Autobiography of William Sanders Scarborough : an American journey from slavery to scholarship* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

<sup>55</sup> Historian Leigh Eric Schmidt observes that “The world of unrecorded sound is irreclaimable... Almost all of early history is eerily silent and so, to evoke those stilled and faded voices, the historian must act as a kind of necromancer.” (15)



Here I refer to the body of work on etiquette that blossomed during the Progressive Era. The demands placed on vocal sound in the theater, and eventually film, radio, and television, were marked by criterion for social vocality as well as by the minstrel tradition. It could be argued that Black concerns over how people sounded in public were, in part, a response to characterizations of Black vocality wafting in from the minstrel stage. In a recent comedy routine, Wanda Sykes does a bit centered on her mother's admonishments about dancing in public. "White people are looking at you," she tells the children, as they move and bob to R&B rhythms in the back seat of the car.<sup>56</sup> (Sykes) Just as the gaze confined how Black people inhabited their bodies in public, so too did the open ear limit and shape "respectable" Black vocality. White people, and respectable Colored people, were *listening-at-you* too, and bad manners only "Intensified White prejudice against the entire Black race." (Gatewood 187)

William Gatewood's *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* describes the "genteel performance," and the cultural implications of sounding Black in African American "Society." Gatewood's project defines the borders of the Black aristocracy, revealing it as a distinct self aware collective as far back as the early nineteenth century. That self awareness meant a continuous meditation on (and policing of) what exactly constituted the Black upper class. Certainly the transient criteria—wealth, education, and even complexion<sup>57</sup>— were always factors. But equally important were what journalist Richard W. Thompson calls *authentic class criteria*-- "character, worth, morals, conduct." (1) Thompson admits that status derives from a "sifting and averaging" of these sterling virtues in the genteel performance. But in the end, "manners, refinement, culture, education, and super-respectability" defined the Black elite as clearly as did

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<sup>56</sup> The bit is titled, "Dignified Black People "

<sup>57</sup> Is color transient? Not in the sense that it is brief, temporary, or passing (no pun intended). But as Gatewood suggests, the complexion line, as the color line in the question of hypodescent, was not uniform throughout the United States. Light-skinned-ness is as elusive as Blackness, and depends on the milieu in which it is being tested.

money and ancestry; manners demonstrated class. (Gatewood 22)

Chief among the factors of super-respectability was the way individuals used the voice in conversation and public interaction. As Ralph Tyler observed in 1891, “flawless English” was a mark of the Black upper class. Dialect expressions, conversely, marked one as belonging “*to the lower class of colored people.*” (2) Similarly Edward Green’s tome on Black etiquette addresses propriety in conversation, insisting on a good command of English and a wide vocabulary. It further warns against “evidence of being ill-bred as loud talking, picking the teeth, and cleaning fingernails in public.” (6-7)

Notable examples that fold race and class into social etiquette include E. Azalia Hackley’s *The Colored Girls Beautiful* (1916). Hackley is an interesting subject in the discussion of voice because she was a concert vocalist and voice teacher, one whom music historian Eileen Southern dubs “Our National Voice Teacher.” (Gatewood 184) In *The Colored Girls Beautiful*, Hackley addresses conversation etiquette, and the “stigma of loudness and coarseness that now rests upon the race.” She advises self control, “a soft voice,” and warns against talkativeness “in a loud voice and in public.” (47) Hackley returns time and again to the theme of self restraint, as demonstrated in the eponymously titled chapter to young girls:

Talkativeness is another "Spot," and a sign of lost control. In public places, especially, it is a sign of ill breeding and bad taste. Good breeding should always keep a woman from loud talk. We must remove the stigma of loudness and coarseness that now rests upon the race. The less a person knows, the bigger noise she generally makes. The big touring car never makes the noise that a motor cycle does, nor does a great steamer make the fuss that a tug boat does. The deep stream is silent while the little brook babbles. (47)

The display of Black aptitude in the genteel performance was strategic to the Black elite’s argument for inclusion into mainstream American society. But Hackley’s advice can also be read as a moment wherein the seemingly progressive aims of the Black elite (integration) reinforce regressive patterns of patriarchal hegemony. Hackley’s directives to maintain “a soft voice” and guard against talkativeness notify young Black

women that they are expected to sit quietly, to “know their place” in a world that remains male-dominated as well as White-dominated. That this “advice” is inscribed by a Black woman complicates the negotiation of power occurring at this moment. Hackley, as a Black woman, masters one of the domains of power and influence by publishing and distributing her work to pre World War I Black communities across the country. Yet within her text, she reinforces traditional strictures on Black and female vocality in the service of patriarchal, Ne(gro) Victorian, assimilationist aspirations.<sup>58</sup> Of course, Hackley may have framed this differently outside of her writings, and like Booker T. Washington, said publically what was politically expedient, while privately working more subversive angles. And to be fair, Hackley’s work to help educate and fund the education of young African Americans in classical vocal studies testify to a life dedicated to progressive ideals. But as an historical record, Hackley’s reinforcement of constraints on women’s public vocality makes hook’s observations positing utterance and publically speaking one’s mind as a contumacious deed an even more strikingly keen observation. (hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* 8)

Most descriptions of good behavior and descriptions of bad public behavior invoke voice, public speaking, conversation, and volume. Manners books, etiquette columns in Black newspaper, and pamphlets distributed by the NAACP and Urban Leagues between 1890s and WWII regularly warned against loud talking, and vulgarity. Boisterousness is a common theme among critics of the “common Negro.”<sup>59</sup> “Common Negroes” were (*are?*) often denigrated by the guardians of propriety for their

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<sup>58</sup> Hackley’s biographer Lisa Pertillar Brevard notes that *The Colored Girl Beautiful* was written in response to a request from Booker T. Washington

<sup>59</sup> See also W. E. B. Du Bois, ed., *Morals and Manners Among Negro Americans* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1914), 17-24.; E. Azalia Hackley, *The Colored Girl Beautiful* (Kansas City: Burton Publishing Co., 1916); Edward S. Green, *National Capital Code of Etiquette* (Washington: Austin Jenkins Co., 1920); Edward E. Wilson, “Negro Society in Chicago,” *Voice of the Negro*, VI (July, 1907), 307; E. M. Woods, *The Negro in Etiquette: A Novelty* (St. Louis: Baxton and Skinner, 1899); and “The Gospel of Civility” (*Lecture at Lincoln Institute, 1896*).

“boisterousness,” their “loud talking and laughing,” and for being “vulgar and loud and sometimes annoying.”<sup>60</sup>

There are overtones of Victorian asceticism at work in these rebukes. The crusade against boisterousness doubled as a campaign against corporeality. Volume, in particular, ascribes the voice to action, potentially disruptive action. Lumping boisterousness in with hygiene issues further connects loudness to the intimate corners of the body, and as something as repugnant as cleaning fingernails. John E. Bruce disparages the common man for being not only loud, but simultaneously unkempt, and menacing. (1) For DuBois’s Talented Tenth, the so-called *Upper Ten*, boisterousness signaled a lack of bodily control and of self-regulation.

More importantly, it was feared as ammunition for sustained anti-Black legislation and unfavorable sentiments among Whites concerning Black self-reliance.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Boisterousness, class, and race seemed to have been a reoccurring editorial subject. For additional examples, see Calvin Chase, “Jim Crow Car,” (*The Washington Bee*, August 10, 1901) 1, col.2; R. Henry Herbert, “The Very Common Negro,” (*Indianapolis: The Freeman*, Feb 23 1895), 4; J. Wilson Pettus “The Negroes are to Blame,” (*The Washington Bee*, August 24 1901);

<sup>61</sup> The Mississippi Vagrancy Law, part of the Mississippi Black Codes passed in 1865, condemns “wanton, or lascivious persons, in speech or behavior” as vagrants punishable by fine and or jail time. Section two of the same provision sought to prohibit Black people from what it describes as “unlawful assembly,” here meaning most social assemblies of people for purposes other than worship or employment:

Section 2. Be it further enacted, that all freedmen, free Negroes, and mulattoes in this state over the age of eighteen years found on the second Monday in January 1866, or thereafter, with no lawful employment or business, or found unlawfully assembling themselves together either in the day or nighttime, and all white persons so assembling with freedmen, free Negroes, or mulattoes, or usually associating with freedmen, free Negroes, or mulattoes on terms of equality, or living in adultery or fornication with a freedwoman, free Negro, or mulatto, shall be deemed vagrants; and, on conviction thereof, shall be fined in the sum of not exceeding, in the case of a freedman, free Negro, or mulatto, \$150, and a white man, \$200, and imprisoned at the discretion of the court, the free Negro not exceeding ten days, and the white man not exceeding six months. (An Act to Amend the Vagrant Laws of the State)

The US Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866 to counter similar codes enacted in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. But before the end of the century, these states would incorporate many of the same provisions into Jim Crow Laws that would last until 1964. While the original provisions within Black Codes seem primarily

William Gatewood reflects on how the supposed obligation of the elite effected the reception of Black sound:

Fully aware that they were not upper class Americans but upper class Negro Americans whose African blood identified them with a people considered inferior “by the larger society,” they almost invariably linked adherence to the conventions governing manners, etiquette, and decorum with racial concerns. In their view the practice of the genteel performance would advance “the progress of the race.” Assuming that the crudities and vulgarities displayed by the black masses especially in public places, were responsible for much of the legal and extralegal discrimination against the whole race, they sought to eliminate a significant source of white prejudice by behaving in the ways that conformed to the canons of respectability embraced by the larger society and by encouraging other blacks to follow their example. (208)

Certainly these attitudes about manners were not unique to Black society during the Progressive Era cycle of American temperance and xenophobia. But the collapse of Reconstruction (1877) the scripting of Black Laws (1865-66, and again in the late 1880s), legislative changes at the state level across the former Confederacy (1890-1920), and *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) further threatened the African American elite’s aspirations of an amalgamation with White society.

### THE SPIRITUALS

One method pursued to counter theories of inherent Black inferiority<sup>62</sup> was to

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aimed at reestablishing the economic order enjoyed under slavery, they also represents an attempt to legislate against Black presences in the (White) public sphere outside of their economic roles as laborers or entertainers. The dismantling of Black Codes in 1866 did not prevent the reemergence, as Mark Smith argues, of legislation establishing segregation as comprehensive sensory separation of black and whites. It is ironic that many of the Black Elite at the turn of the century held that a similar repression of sound, sight, smell, and visual presence in public might lead to the integration of African American and European American societies. See also Mark Smith, *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 11-65.

<sup>62</sup> These arguments, in turn, provided some of the ideological underpinnings for anti-black sentiment and legislation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century— Black Codes, anti miscegenation laws, and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan following the Civil War. The pseudoscience of racial taxonomy, Spencerian capitalism, and Social Darwinism also buttressed anti-black, anti immigrant

demonstrate the capacity of Black people to function within and contribute to Western civilization. Just as Phyllis Wheatley's (1753-1784) and Olaudah Equiano's (1745–1797) literary work was as much personal creative expression as a retort to European characterizations of Africans as cultureless and incapable of high art, performers such as James Hewlitt and Ira Aldridge (1807-1867) placed Black classical performance in ontological opposition to theories of Black aesthetic and cultural inferiority. What is more, the exploits of Blacks in classical forms of theater and music prove a generative place to study voice, performance, and race.<sup>63</sup>

In particular, the concert spiritual vehemently challenged White constructions of Blackness through sound and voice. The spiritual itself became increasingly important as a rhetorical foil up through the Harlem Renaissance. The presentation of what had been known as slave songs through formal choral arrangements during Reconstruction shepherded this renaissance of the spirituals, and countered the stereotypes of minstrel buffoonery with voices of elegant restraint, yet profound emotion.

Listening to the early recordings of the Fisk Jubilee singers, for example, the concert spiritual seems the antithesis of minstrel dialects. It is a sound marked by long, deeply rounded vowel sounds, and by crisp hyper-articulate consonants. Though one finds bent blue notes, a penchant for vibrato, and a density of sound through the harmonies common to Black Atlantic musical traditions, absent are the dropped final consonants recognized by linguists as characteristic of AAE.

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sentiment, and the eugenics movement in the early twentieth century through works like Thomas Dixon's (1864-1946) *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden—1865-1900* (1902), Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), and Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising of Color against White Supremacy* (1920).

<sup>63</sup> Barbara Conrad was a University of Texas undergraduate student in the school of music who was cast, then barred from performing the title role in a production of *Dido and Aeneas* opposite a white male lead in 1957. A recent documentary about her—*Still I Rise* provides insight into the racial politics of casting in American opera and classical voice studies. These issues continue to be a fertile ground for the study of race in classical voice through the work of scholars like Marti Newland, Jeffery Paul Smith, and Nina Eidsheim Sun.

The Black concert tradition did not begin with the Fisk Singers. As a formal institution, it dates back to the 1820s, where individuals and ensembles presented classical voice music with accompaniment to public audiences. Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, for example, was considered the first Black concert singer, and toured internationally prior to the Civil War. In addition to professional vocalists, free communities founded choral groups such as the Union Harmonic Society; Amateur Society, Garrison Juvenile Society, Phoenixonian. These groups were social organizations as well as performing troupes. These early artists preferred the work of European composers notably Chappell, Handel, and eventually Bellini, Gluck, Haydn, and Mozart, but laid the foundations for the concert spiritual form. (Southern 105)

A major shift in performance trends would come after the Civil War with the creation of Fisk University in 1866 by the American Missionary Association. In the midst of financial trouble, Fisk choir director George L. White organized a troupe of singers as a fundraising effort in 1871, with a goal of raising \$20,000 for the struggling institution. After laboring through their first few engagements, the troupe found a receptive audience in New York in December of 1871 at the church of Henry Ward Beecher. By April of the following year they had met their \$20,000 goal, and in 1873 launched a tour in Europe. Over the next 7 years, the troupe would earn over \$150,000. The troupe disbanded in 1878, but recasts its membership with private patronage as the Loudin Jubilee Singers under Frederick Loudin. (Lovell 403)

The initial program interspersed a mix of Irish ballads, sentimental, temperance, and patriotic songs with a few traditional spirituals arranged as formal choral selections. It is significant that in its earliest iteration, the Fisk Jubilee Singers did not perform a full program of spirituals. The program eventually centered on spirituals, but classical and even minstrel selections remained in the repertoire into the twentieth century.

The international notoriety the group would soon garner reveals that public reaction to their performance was not based entirely on the material, but as much on its interpretation by the singers, and on a perceived “unique” quality in their voices. For a

number of listeners, these were new representation of Blackness in performance, though shifting the paradigm proved a slow, accretive process. The newspaper reviews of the Fisk and Hampton troupes, offer valuable insight into how the Black voice was being characterized in the White press. Overwhelmingly, the reviews framed the sound as evocative yet alien. An 1873 review in the *Philadelphia Bulletin* read:

The weird, the wild, the grotesque, the religious, and the comic elements in the African nature seem to be all represented in the songs they sing.” (Lovell 406)

From the British paper *The Standard* on May 7, 1873:

There is something inexpressibly touching in their wonderful sweet round bell voices, in the way in which they sing, so artless in its art, yet so consummate in its expression, and in the mingling of the pathetic with the unconscious comic in the rude hymns, shot here and there with a genuine golden thread of poetry. *The Standard*, May 7, 1873. (Lovell 405)

And another British review of the same performance, this from *The Daily Telegraph* May 8 1873:

Striking contrast in people unmistakably slave derived singing like the best English chorus singers in clear rich highly cultivated voices. (Lovell 405)

Despite the marked difference in sound, the troupe’s Blackness inevitably drew comparisons to “genuine minstrels.” The same *Daily Telegraph* reviewer noted that the Fisk group ought to be “exalted for being minstrels with dignity, without bones, a banjo, or a tambourine, who could keep an audience perpetually entertained.” (Lovell 405)

Success bred imitation. Other troupes emerged, and in 1872, troupes formed at the Hampton Institute in Virginia, and at Fairfield Normal Institute, in South Carolina. These troupes met with similar critical and financial success. The Concert spiritual proved not only a way to maintain Black spiritual traditions, but also an example of how Black performance has represented a significant financial avenue out of unfavorable economic conditions. The groups were also a training ground for young Black vocalists like Roland Hayes (1887–1977) and Matilda Sissieretta Joyner Jones, known as



Sissieretta Jones (1868–1933), concert vocalist, and vaudeville star, entrepreneur, and owner of her own minstrel company, Black Patti's Troubadours. (Southern 246).

Many artists, as individuals and as ensembles, followed the path blazed by the Fisk Jubilee troupe. The ensuing troupes and individual vocalists, in turn, created an important model for Black vocality distinct from the blackface minstrel tradition.<sup>64</sup> For a time, to “sound Black” was to sound like Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, or Paul Robeson. In a sense, the concert spiritual tradition of the late nineteenth century produced these solo concert artists who in turn would represent the standard of Black vocal sound through the Harlem Renaissance and Federal Theaters of the 1930s & 1940s. Perhaps *a* standard of Black vocals would sound better. In all these periods, there never existed one understanding of Black vocality. Rather, each representation of vocal Blackness seemed to compete with and accentuate its cohort. Still, the Black concert artists contributed to the unraveling of monolithic Blackness by demonstrating the diverse capacity of what was still considered a Black sound. (Southern 408) Concert singers Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (1824–1876), the Anna Madah and Emma Louise Hyer, Marie Selika, and Sissieretta Jones established important alternative sound options for Black performers. While often playing with classical European forms, the vocalists of the concert spiritual and the later solo concert artists provided models of vocality that were aesthetically in line with Black Atlantic sound traditions<sup>65</sup>, and modes that were economically viable.

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<sup>64</sup> Note the emergence of choral societies in Black communities at the turn of the century like the Amphion Glee Club in Washington, D.C. in 1892 or the Coleridge-Taylor Choral Society in 1902. These musical social gatherings were indebted to the newly public and widely lauded paradigms of Black vocality presented by the various collegiate Jubilee choirs. In addition, the connections of choral societies to the Black, “anti-boisterous,” Progressive elite, is a subject for further, certainly fruitful, investigation. (Southern 294)

<sup>65</sup> Significantly, vocal ethnicity remains a subject of considerable debate in operatic studies.

## SONG IS THE VOICE

Douglass, Du Bois, and Locke understood the vocal music traditions of African America as a mark of dignity, as intellectual as well as religious, and as an “imaginatively serious” reaction to external definitions of Blackness. Kara Keeling and Josh Kun reflect on how sound erupts in the discourse of race for both Douglass and Du Bois:

This mode of reasoning in which the sounds of the enslaved and exploited challenge the authority of the claims made about the United States in the songs of ‘the free’ has long been part of the bedrock of African American political and cultural resistance and opposition. It was made urgently and oft repeated by Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois, both of whom featured sound, music, and listening in their challenges to American slavery and the American racial order. (Keeling and Kun 452)

Their understandings of the role of the spiritual, heard both as rough slave song and as polished concert material, are simultaneously characterizations of Black vocalicity itself. While each wrote about spirituals as a form of cultural expression, their musings are frames through which the Black voice has come to be understood. I read *song*, as it appears in Douglass’s memoirs and in DuBois’s essays, as Voice, the unaccompanied, instrumentation of the body. In so doing, I find characterizations of Black sound/voice that resonate with subsequent descriptions of Black sound. Each thinker ties Black song/voice to slave songs and to sorrow and anguish. Douglass, as a freedman, describes the depth of suffering conveyed by the voice. He writes:

“They told a tale which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones, loud, long and deep, breathing the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirits, and filled my heart with ineffable sadness.” (Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* 84)

Yet later, he also points out the productive import of Black sound, saying that the “slaves sing more to make themselves happy, than to express their happiness.” (84)

Sounding a similar key, W.E.B. DuBois also notes a sense of collective progress within the Black voice. He writes that the slave songs are “full of the voices of my brothers and sisters, full of the voices of the past.” (DuBois, *Souls* 194) Indeed in the voice, there seems something fractal and, to use Alain Locke’s phrase, a “mustard seed” of entire civilizations within it. For DuBois, Black voices carry the “siftings of centuries” and a sound that is “far more ancient” than the words being sung. (195)

To be sure, these gentlemen were not simply engaging in criticism for criticisms sake. Rather, the way they characterized sound was always propagandistic. It does not diminish the anguish of slavery, but Douglass’ memoir for example, must be read as one of the ways that Black people in the nineteenth century sought to reclaim themselves. These were historiographic interventions of Blackness as much as they were observations of Blackness. Whether these characterizations of Black sound are “true” is to an extent immaterial as the discourse centers on perception and characterization. It may well be that DuBois and Douglass planted the seed in the collective Western imagination that a bent blue note sounds weary and full of anguish. What is material is that these connotations follow the Black voice through the music, through political speeches, and through dramatic performance.

Reading DuBois’s discussion of Sorrow Songs, I imagine him smiling, knowing that song is seductive enough, slippery enough that it cannot be refused. It cannot be turned back in the way that legislation can be repealed, in the way that Black bodies or the sight of Black bodies can be easily deflected. Rather, sound enters without invitation and without the occasion to be checked by the lids. It moves to the interior, literally, in such a way that prompts Du Bois to smirk and write, “Songs conquered.” (195)

For Alain Locke, the spirituals also represented a significant tool for change, and one that centered on redefining what it meant to sound Black. The project of the New Negro was the vindication of the African American image/echo in the popular imagination. But Locke differed with Du Bois in particular in his opinion of Black identities, and the role of cultural expression in shaping those identities. Locke’s reading

of the spiritual, and specifically of the dual forces of dialect and Black prosody would have serious implications for the playwrights and actors of the Harlem Renaissance. Rather than sweep African American dialects and the rhythms of Black speech under the carpet of operatic diction, Locke held that these folk elements were an essential, priceless “reservoir.” In so doing, he introduced yet another compelling model for Black vocality in the early twentieth century. Distinct from the comedic exaggerations of minstrelsy, and from the hyper-diction of well mannered concert vocalists, Locke posited a sentimental deployment of “authentic” dialect which would capture both the African sense and mood within a European dramatic form—the folk drama. The children of the Black elite would find use for the boisterous common Negro as the folk-font of its soul.

## CHAPTER 3, NEW NEGRO AND BLACK ARTS VOCAL THEORY

### New Negro Sound: Responding to the Minstrel Image/Echo

For historians like Eric Lott and Elizabeth McLeod, audio blackface was either a proletarian entertainment created through White on White class struggle, only coincidentally denigrating, or it was an accurate mimesis of Black English, and thereby not limiting or essentialist. For others like Michael Pickering, the minstrel performance had the power to distort understandings of Blackness. Black intellectuals and artists of the time appear to have regarded minstrelsy as the latter. David Krasner similarly argues that from the early twentieth century, Black theater developed as a project of the “re-appropriation and redefinition” of Black theatrical representation. The Black elite and the ensuing generations invested in the ideas of uplift and engaged vocal rejoinders—concert spirituals, Black minstrel performance, Black musical theater, and folk dramas—to deepen the implications of sounding Black. Additionally, they did so long before the cultural awakening known as the Harlem Renaissance.

As early as the 1850s, Fredrick Douglass objected to the negative vibrations of minstrelsy, seventy years prior to the New Negro movement, *in medias res*, and not from a position of historical reflection. His response predictably suggests that Black concerns were contemporary in minstrelsy’s heyday, and that those concerns stemmed from the perpetuation of inauthentic characterizations of Black people— *character* at once indicating dramatic role and inner self.

Douglass considered how the minstrel performance framed Blackness as a matter of display or theater. In an article for the *North Star*, Douglass comments on a performance by Gavitt’s Original Ethiopian Serenaders, a White minstrel group popular in the U.S. and England through the 1850s. (Meer 152) Unimpressed by the performance, Douglass identifies the effect of minstrelsy in the formation of negative attitudes of African Americans in nineteenth century public imaginations. For Douglass,

Gavitt's players only helped to "feed the flame of American prejudice against colored people." (Douglass, Gavitt's) Yet the same time, he saw a potentially productive capacity in performance. He observes:

It is something gained when the colored man in any form can appear before a White audience; and we think that even this company, with industry, application, and a proper cultivation of their taste, may yet be instrumental in removing the prejudice against our race. But they must cease to exaggerate the exaggerations of our enemies; and represent the colored man rather as he is, than as Ethiopian Minstrels usually represent him to be. They will then command the respect of both races; whereas now they only shock the taste of the one, and provoke the disgust of the other. (Douglass, Gavitt's 141)

Unimpressed is perhaps too sweeping a generalization of Douglass' editorial. He does, in fact, compliment a few of the individual performers for their talent. He admits that one of the singers, Cooper, had a "fine voice," that Davis as Bones was a "master player," and that B. Richardson dancing the Virginia breakdown was an "extraordinary character. (Douglass, Gavitt's 141)" These were talented African American performers<sup>66</sup> on a public European stage, and Douglass, in his equally public print editorial, strategically praises the performers while condemning the performance.<sup>67</sup> He understood

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<sup>66</sup> A sardonic Douglass signifies concerning the troupe of performers clad in burnt cork: "The Company is said to be composed entirely of colored people, and it may be so. (Douglass, Gavitt's 141)"

<sup>67</sup> At the writing of this document, a similar response to the recent film *The Help* has been made by some Black women historians. *The Help*, a 2009 novel by Kathryn Stockett, made into a film in 2011, centers on a young White woman seeking to tell the story of three African American domestic workers during the 1960s in Jackson, MS. In August of 2011, shortly after the film's release, the Association of Black Women Historians (ABWH) published an "Open Statement to Fans of *The Help*" in response to the depictions of Jackson's African American community (of which I am a descendant) stating that "*The Help* distorts, ignores, and trivializes the experiences of black domestic workers. We are specifically concerned about the representations of black life and the lack of attention given to sexual harassment and civil rights activism." (Jones, Berry and Gill) Germaine to this study, the open statement goes on to critique the film and the book for its depiction of African American speech:

Both versions of *The Help* also misrepresent African American speech and culture. Set in the South, the appropriate regional accent gives way to a child-like, over-exaggerated "black" dialect. In the film, for example, the primary character, Aibileen, reassures a young white child that, "You is smat[sic], you is kind, you is important." In the book,

the possibilities afforded by performance, even by minstrelsy, to reclaim and re-inscribe the image/echo of Blackness.

As African Americans broke through as performers rather than as characters in minstrelsy, they soon found an ability to shape performance and to affect social opinions. The production of new images/echoes would become a potent tool in the vindication of the Negro in the minds of Whites, and for the uplift, social and economic, of Blacks. A significant aim, then, of Black theatrical activity at the end of nineteenth and top of the twentieth century was the “correction of false ideas” about Black character. Writing toward the end of the New Negro era in the late 1930s, John D. Silvera, an official for the Federal Theater, describes the purpose of Black theater. In an article to the *Crisis* in 1936, Silvera writes:

The purpose of any Negro theater worthy of the name should be devoted to the correction of false ideas concerning the Negro. Some may say that this would make for a theater of propaganda and that as such it would not be real theater. Nothing is further from the truth, for with capable writing, themes well chosen and skillfully executed propaganda can be coupled with entertainment. (77)

By 1936, Silvers was in many ways preaching to the choir, or at best, passing on an approach to those who would theorize the Black Arts Movement. Earlier artists and thinkers advocated a similar “use” of theatrical performance. W.E.B. DuBois, for example, in his essay “A Negro Art Renaissance,” argues that theater ought to “challenge the minstrel image of buffoonery and the propaganda of slavery.” (Krasner, Pageant 264)

Black theater artists began a process of undoing the representations of minstrelsy, reconstructing it through musical theater and the folk drama forms. In each form, sound,

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black women refer to the Lord as the “Law,” an irreverent depiction of black vernacular.” (Jones, Berry and Gill)

Similar to Douglass in his reflection on Gavitt’s Original Ethiopian Serenaders, the ABWH statement praised the “stellar performances” of Viola Davis and the other African American actresses while sounding critiquing the film for its “popular rendition of black life in the Jim Crow South.” (Jones, Berry and Gill)

both musical and vocal, played a key role in the reinvention of Blackness. Black performance during the period was always about the nature of Blackness because all theatrical activity involving African Americans, as Krasner points out, consistently wrestled with “issues of authorship, acting, dialect, subject matter, audience, and culture” (Krasner, Pageant 208)

This vindication of the Negro, argues Jon Michael Spencer, was the principle goal of the Harlem Renaissance. In vindication, Spencer suggests that artists and thinkers sought to declare Black people anew in the minds of White people, and to suspend the mythological timbre of Blackness in public discourse. The New Negro movement was an effort which sought to dissolve the myths “perpetuated about the Negro.” (2) It was, in its intentions, a contest between the perpetuation of the Old Negro (antebellum, minstrel, huddling, ignorant, mass), and the dissemination of the New Negro (cosmopolitan, multicultural, contributing culturally to American civilization, individualistic.) As editorialist Charles Johnson wrote in the *Opportunity* (1923), Black people in the early twentieth century (and beyond) were consistently measured against, and measured themselves against, representations of “fictitious” beings “unlike any real Negro.” (Public Opinion and the Negro) These theatrical simulacra only succeeded in furthering racial prejudice and discrimination. In response, from Reconstruction through the New Negro Movement, Black theater in the US experienced significant changes not only in form, but in aesthetic approach and social significance. The pursuit of racial uplift, an intense socio-political antipathy toward Black emancipation, and the adoption of modernist folk-centric aesthetics by Black artists and intellectuals like Hughes, Hurston, Willis Richardson, and Eulalie Spence all converged to create a period of vivacious theatrical activity.

Prior to World War I, (generally considered pre-Harlem Renaissance) W.E.B. DuBois began urging the new generation of dramatic writers. In the April 1915 issue of the *Crisis*, DuBois appeals:

In art and literature we should try to loose the tremendous emotional



wealth of the Negro and the dramatic strength of his problems through writing... and other forms of art. We should resurrect forgotten ancient Negro art and history, and we should set the black man before the world as both a creative artist and a strong subject for artistic treatment. (DuBois, *The Immediate Program of the American Negro* 312)

Sometime later, in November of 1924, Charles Johnson's *Opportunity* and Du Bois' *The Crisis* began awarding prizes in playwriting through a series of contests sponsored by the support of Amy Springarn, Casper Hostein, and a collective of Black owned banks, insurance agencies, and fraternal and sororal societies. In July 1926, DuBois went a step further by proposing the establishment of a theatrical troupe to bring new plays to life. In the article, DuBois lays out the often quoted tenants of African American drama:

The plays of a real Negro theatre must be: 1. "about us." That is, they must have plays which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. "By us." That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continued association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. "For us." That is, the theater must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. "Near us." The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro peoples. 5. "About us." Plots must reflect real Negro life (DuBois, *Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre: The Story of a Little Theatre Movement* 134)

The result was the "Crisis Guild of Writers and Actors", or CRIGWA Players (later changed to KRIGWA Players), which according to Du Bois, was "an attempt to establish... a center where Negro actors before Negro audiences interpret Negro life as depicted by Negro artists" (Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists (KRIGWA)) The troupe began performing in the basement of a public library on 135<sup>th</sup> St. in New York, producing the work of Willis Richardson (*The Broken Banjo*) and Ruth Ada Gaines-Shelton (*The Church Fight*) and Eulalie Spence (*The Fool's Errand*) as part of its inaugural program.

But KRIGWA and other small art theaters in Harlem faced the challenge of inadequate funding, space, and importantly, the "old division," of purpose. (Hatch 223)

DuBois' exhortation belies his conception of Black authenticity, Black art, and Black audiences. That he frames his appeal for art for "the mass of ordinary Negro peoples," and the depiction of "real Negro life" are telling given his subsequent clash with Alain Locke and Eulalie Spencer over the finer points of "ordinary" and "real." DuBois foretold a century mired in race, and therefore, one wanting a conception of Blackness that was "distinct from minstrelsy." (Pinkey 12) DuBois felt that challenging the reverberations of minstrelsy ought to occur through historical pageants of Black life. At the same time, modernist ideas led Locke to advocate an excavation of folk traditions for the construction of introspective high art. The tension between the aesthetic perspectives presented by Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois bears noting. For each, creativity was a cunning arrow in the quiver to solve the race problem. But art became a match-ground for contention over new definitions of Blackness, and the resulting cultural expressions continued to find sound, vocality, and language in the middle of the fight over authentic Blackness.

Locke and DuBois each seized on the Art Theater or Little Theater movement developing in White theaters in the U.S. and in Europe to encourage a new generation of artist to create alternatives to minstrelsy and musicals. Locke was particularly drawn to the movement's instantiation in Dublin through the efforts of Lady Gregory (1852–1932) and William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). Irish playwrights were undermining stereotypic depictions of Irish characters through their juxtaposition of scripted dialect and serious, introspective characterizations. As Locke writes, "Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland." (7)

Locke and DuBois each advocated drawing on Black history and cultural forms to create new, American ones-- in fact, to position Black cultural production as the foundation for the artistic work of all Americans regardless of race. Looking at European artistic traditions as models, both Locke and DuBois felt that spirituals and slave songs provided a potential analogue for the way Russian classical music and drama drew from Slavic folk traditions. Johnny Washington observes that Locke held in high esteem the

creation of an “artist class,” congruent with Du Bois’ Talented Tenth, who might “serve as Socratic midwives” in America’s cultural destiny. (Washington 22) As Locke puts it:

Indeed as what seems to be the special race genius matures and gains momentum, it becomes increasingly apparent that the Negro's unique experience and heredity combined may have fitted him for a special creative role in American life as an artist class, as a special re-agent, and as a spiritual leaven. (Locke, *Negro Contributions to America* 257)

For Locke as well, the voice contained in spirituals was the essence of Black cultural expression. It was a distillate of the creative power of an entire civilization denied access to any other raw material beside emotion and the body. Locke writes:

In a compensatory way the artistic urges of the American Negro flowed toward the only channels left open— those of song, movement, and speech, and the body itself became the Negro's primary and only artistic instrument. Greatest of all came the development of the irrepressible art of the voice which is today the Negro's greatest single artistic asset.<sup>68</sup> (Locke, *Artist* 542)

Locke’s focus was the reinvigoration of American music and literature with the introduction of traditional African American folk material, musical and linguistic, melodic and prosodic. He advocates the development of a great native born classical music tradition using Black folk music as its basis. Moreover, his reading of Black vocality as expressed in spirituals draws attention to the dual forces of “peasant dialect” and the rhythms of Black prosody. Locke also re-imagined Black English, re-heard it if you will, not as farce but as poignancy. He hears something generative beneath the “broken words, childish imagery, peasant simplicity” of dialect. (Locke, *The Negro Spirituals* 200) That re-hearing opened a distinct vocal soundscape for the playwrights and actors of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Originally published in *American Magazine of Art* 23 (Sept. 1931) Alain L. Locke, "The American Negro as Artist."

<sup>69</sup> Most famously Zora Nealee Huston and Langston Hughes employed dialect in their prosodic, dramatic, and poetic writing. But other Black writers such as Mary Burrill (1884-1946), May Miller (1899-

Locke agreed with DuBois in that African Americans first had to re-imagine the self by dissociating with the blackface image of White imagination. But Locke and DuBois differed on the *extent* to which race and the history of Black Americans should figure in the artistry of a new generation. George Hall posits that “Locke and DuBois agreed about what constituted good art. It was the function of art on which they did not agree.” (Hall 92) Locke and Eulalie Spence separately fell out with DuBois over the aesthetic orientation of New Negro playwrighting. Again, DuBois felt strongly that art generally, and theater specifically ought to be considered a tool for propaganda in redressing the image of Black Americans in the public eye. Conversely, in a letter to the *Opportunity* in June of 1928, Spence warned other playwrights to avoid the “drama of propaganda if they would not meet with certain disaster.” A salvo at DuBois and his call for art that is propaganda, Spence goes on to write, “the white man is cold and unresponsive to this subject and the Negro himself, is hurt and humiliated by it. We go to the theater for entertainment, not to have old fires and hates rekindled.” (381)

At times, even the constitution of “good art” seemed to be a point of contention between the two philosophers. In “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926) published in *The Crisis*, DuBois famously wrote that “all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists.” DuBois extended his critique of artistic dilettantism and the failure, or rather absence of autotelic art among Renaissance writers in his review of *The New Negro*:

With one point alone do I differ with the editor. Mr. Locke has newly been seized with the idea that beauty rather than propaganda should be the object of Negro literature and art. His book proves the falseness of this

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1995), Willis Richardson (1889-1877), and Eulalie Spence (1894-1981) at times also used dialect. Of course, not all playwrights of the period relied on scripting dialect. Others such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935), Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880-1966), and Marita Bonner (1898-1971) largely avoided dialect. Even Hurston occasionally strayed from “Black” dialect as evinced in her one-act play *The First One*. Here Hurston uses what might be called King James dialect to depict the biblical story of Noah and the sons of Ham. (Of course, the question remains as to whether Hurston considered these characters Black.) (Burton)

thesis. This is a book filled and bursting with propaganda, but it is for the most part beautifully done; and it is a grave question if ever this world in any renaissance there can be a search for disembodied beauty which is not really a passionate effort to do something tangible, accompanied and illuminated and made holy by the vision of eternal beauty. (DuBois, review of Alain Locke (ed.) *The New Negro* 141).

Locke's response makes a severe distinction between DuBois's clarion for art as propaganda, and his own ideas about the direction for young artists. In "Art or Propaganda," first published in the November 1928 issue of the periodical *Harlem*, Locke writes,

Artistically, it is one fundamental question for us today—art or propaganda... my single objection to propaganda, apart from its besetting sin of monotony and disproportion, it's that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it. For it leaves and speaks under the shadow of a dominant majority whom it harangues, cajoles, threatens, or supplicates. It is too extroverted for balance or poise or inner dignity and self respect. (Locke, *Art or Propaganda?* 12)

Like Spence, Locke warns young Black writers to avoid art that leaned toward "sensationalism and exhibitionism," and the retooling of old stereotypes into newer versions favored by White patrons. As an aesthetician, Locke felt that there was no need to preach through art or seek to inspire. Locke seemed to contend that in the case of writers like Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen, race was becoming a convention "purely for the sake of art," to be supplanted by technical distinctiveness, and repositioned as an "idiom of style," rather than the focus of artistic expression. All that was needed of the new generation of Black artists was "an introspective calm; a spiritually poised approach;" these attributes-- not "special pleading—" were enough to achieve the common goal of cultural advancement and artistic excellence. (Locke, 1928: *A Retrospective Review*)

DuBois would, over time, pull away from the pluralist goal that Locke held in high regard, and Locke, conversely, continued to move away from the importance of race

as the central determining element of identity. Rebecca T. Cureau argues that Locke held a fundamentally different view of race than did Du Bois, citing Locke's reading of a new understanding of race among the young writers of the Renaissance. (Cureau 80) With the convergence of Africans, West Indians, and African Americans (both northern and the southern) in Harlem and into Black colleges like Howard University in Washington D.C., Locke saw a changing dynamic which may have contributed to his difference of opinion with Du Bois, a sense that, "Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination," that Blackness was becoming "a life in common," rather than "a problem in common." Locke interpreted "The New Negro" to indicate a discovery among Blacks of a new sense of self, Blackness that is not a condition, but rather an internal aspect of the self that needs tending, reflection, and expression as high and folk art. (Locke, *The New Negro* 7) A part of that tending of New Negro consciousness meant balancing an African mood and spirit with European forms and techniques. Locke, as a modernist was concerned with the transformation of folk art into high art, through a tiered system of mastery that gave European classical form to African rhythms.

### **FOLK DRAMA & MUSICALS**

Locke's listening was certainly problematic. His audition filtered through the primitivist penchant of the White art world. He and others of the Harlem Renaissance were also caught in the crossfire of modernist aesthetics and the noblesse oblige of the Black elite.<sup>70</sup>

The constant among the two forces was an emphasis on authenticity, a concept that often linked voice and race, through performance. For the Black elite, the idea of authentic meant a refutation of what Locke called the pseudo-Negro, both Black and

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<sup>70</sup> Etiquette among the Black elite, not only valued restraint of the self, but also held that the cultivated few were obliged to disseminate the ideal of restraint to the masses, and as Azalia Hackley admonished, to become "race missionaries" (106)

White, created by minstrelsy. Krasner writes:

From 1918 to 1927, the term authentic meant a new Black person in opposition to the Sambo-Coon-Aunt Jemima stereotypes of the past. Authenticity was a term intended to convey an effort to cleanse the stain of minstrelsy. Authenticity would challenge minstrelsy's claim to the 'real,' with Black people themselves creating the truly authentic image. Artists and performers were keenly aware of the continuing redefinition of African American identity, with the question of authenticity becoming an internal as well as interracial issue. (264)

Krasner goes on to point out that the turn of the century was marked by a 'culture of authenticity.' The issue was the inconsistency of the term authenticity.<sup>71</sup> The etiquette columns and manner books<sup>72</sup> held dialect, even when accurately executing some of the distinguishing qualities of AAE, as both intolerable and inauthentic. Theatrically, an authenticity born of White imaginations gave rise to new kinds of blackface minstrel productions which, like Sam T. Jack's *Creole Show* (1894), used real, live Black folks as performers. But while the bodies that appeared on stage changed, the material remained rooted in the blackface minstrel tradition. Black performers continued to use burnt cork to blacken their faces; overly-affected dialect remained its stylistic signature and comedic marker. Still, some Black performers took advantage of the clamor for authenticity, not only to get paid, but also to reverse and re-inscribe Black authenticity.

### **BLACK MINSTRELSY<sup>73</sup>**

In his *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora*, Louis Chude-Sokei examines Bert Williams' performance career and the identity struggles of West Indian immigrants in the U.S. during the early twentieth

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<sup>71</sup> See also Miles Orvell's *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940*. Cultural studies of the United States. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

<sup>72</sup> See Chapter 2, note 59 for a list of examples.

<sup>73</sup> Again, I will follow Anne Marie Bean's distinction of Black minstrelsy (minstrelsy performed by African Americans) and White minstrelsy (minstrelsy performed by Whites).

century. Along the way, he connects minstrelsy and Black modernism using performance and mimicry—sonic, visual, and cultural—as spokes in his theoretical wheel. Surprisingly, though convincingly, Chude-Sokei finds in Williams’ blackface performance, and in Black minstrelsy as a whole, a progressivism that in line with the New Negro project of re-appropriating Blackness. Rather than approach minstrelsy as a matter of representational control, Chude-Sokei examines how desire and pleasure are bound up with the caricature and facade. He notes:

Rather than simply describing Black minstrelsy as self denigration or dismissing it as a desperate but necessary way to enter into American popular theater, it would be fruitful to explore the various forms of desire embedded in that masochistic self-denigration and the will to self-annihilation coded in this particular use of the mask. (99)

Specifically, Chude-Sokei argues that Black minstrelsy confronted the tastes of turn of the century Black elite. The work of George and Adah Walker, Bert Williams, and their contemporaries contributed to the larger wave of anti-Victorianism that attended the New Negro movement.<sup>74</sup> Accordingly, dialect, Black musical sound, and primitivist themes connected Black minstrelsy to the cult of the folk embraced by many New Negroists. Every part of the mix fed the generational conflict over the reconstruction of the Black image/echo between the Ne(gr)o Victorians and the New Negroes. The Black urban primitivism of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes “...tapped into the libidinal and ludic possibilities of ‘Black soul’,” to counter the elder generations conservatism. (99) Similarly, the Black minstrel performance housed stereotypes that quickly subverted the conservative, “protective social mimicry” approved by the Black political elite. Furthermore, the libidinal and ludic nature of minstrelsy—replete with cross dressing, innuendo, and slapstick violence—clashed with Black elite’s program of self restraint. (55) Here, Chude-Sokei finds Williams and Black minstrelsy so anti-Victorian. Black

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<sup>74</sup> Mark Summers writes in depth about this subject in *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (2004).



minstrelsy, he argues, functioned through an “economy of pleasure” wherein *Black* audiences found recreation “in an embrace” of their own stereotype. What made White minstrelsy (blackface minstrelsy performed by White people) and similar stereotypical depictions offensive, in part, was the fact that they carried with them an underlying menace. Their grotesquery implies the violent dehumanization that historically accompanies Othering, and allows for the physical violence that serves to police and Black people.

Extending Chude-Sokei’s line of thinking, I submit that sound plays a vital role in the economy of pleasure carved out by Black minstrelsy. While visually mired in a White image of Blackness, Black minstrelsy signified on White minstrelsy through its sonic choices. It re-worked the framework for sounding “colored,” and for many Black audiences, maneuvered those negative images and echoes of Blackness into the background. Indeed, changes in music and dialogue, accompanied by adjustments to the blackface minstrelsy format<sup>75</sup> initiated the shift from blackface minstrelsy to the Black musical.

To begin, Black minstrelsy re-inscribed sounding Black through new music choices. They sweetened “plantation” representations of Blackness with music and dance popular among Black audiences, and cast Black vocalists steeped and rooted in Black music traditions. The work of Bob Cole and the Johnson Brothers and collaborations between Will Marion Cook and Paul Lawrence Dunbar, showcase Black composers pairing traditional minstrel show music with ragtime and jazz. A useful example of the shift to recontextualize Black vocal performance came with the production of *Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk* (1898) by composer William Marion Cook (a classically

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<sup>75</sup> Managers began expanding the one-act “playlets” of the afterpiece, and diversifying the specialty acts within the olio.

trained musician and composer) and poet Paul Laurence Dunbar.<sup>76</sup> The hour long sketch comedy ran at the New York Theater, becoming the first show with an all African American cast to play at one of the premier Broadway houses.<sup>77</sup> *Clorindy* was a successful fusion of minstrel libretto and ragtime score. Dunbar wrote the libretto using his trademark dialect-in-verse for the dialogue.<sup>78</sup> However, though the libretto still used dialect, Cook planted the vocal performance, spoken and sung, in the *terre-au-courant* of ragtime music as an inroad for Black audiences. The show was a financial success; it became a model for a Black theater hounded by minstrelsy, and helped break the hold of blackface minstrelsy for Black theater makers. Its reception by Black audiences reveals a complex interplay of sound as dialect vs. sound as music. Cook himself relates an interesting account in the discussion of sound and the reclamation of the Black image/echo when he describes his mother's reaction to one of the songs from *Clorindy*. Cook writes,

The following morning or rather later that morning, I was at John's piano trying to learn to play my most Negroid<sup>79</sup> song, "Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd?" My mother, who was cooking my breakfast, came into the

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<sup>76</sup> The collaboration included Will Marion Cook, Thomas L. Riis, Jesse Shipp, Alex Rogers, James Vaughan, J L. Hill, and Paul L. Dunbar.

<sup>77</sup> The piece opened at the New York Theater on February 18, 1903 and ran in New York, London, and Boston through 1905.

<sup>78</sup> From *Clorindy*:  
*Evah dahkey is a King.*  
*Royalty is jes' de ting.*  
*If yo' social life is a bungle,*  
*Jes' you go back to the jungle,*  
*And remember dat you daddy was a king.*  
*White fo'k's what's got dahkey servants,*  
*Try and get dem everything.*  
*You must never speak insulting.*  
*You may be talking to a king. (W. M. Cook)*

<sup>79</sup> Cook is silent on his precise definition of "Negroid Song," but a version of "Who Dat Say Chicken In Dis Crowd" by Sousa's Band, recorded in 1900, can be heard on the Library of Congress website: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihis/loc.natlib.ihis.100000208/default.html>.

parlor, tears streaming from her eyes, and said: "Oh, Will! Will! I've sent you all over the world to study and become a great musician, and you return such a nigger!" My mother was a graduate of Oberlin in the class of 1865 and thought that a Negro composer should write just like a White man. They all loved the [Paul Laurence] Dunbar lyrics but weren't ready for Negro songs." (xxxii)

Accompanying ragtime renovations, Black performers, playwrights, and composers re-conventionalized minstrelsy's approach to stage speech in order to expand the scope of Black characterization. Bob Cole, for instance, used a "stereotypically colored" sound to mask his inversion of blackface (Cole appeared in whiteface) in *A Trip to Coontown*. But the position of dialect would not remain mired in the conventions of minstrelsy. In particular, shifts in dialect became increasingly common during scenes of emotional intimacy. Robert Toll contends that *The Shoo Fly Regiment* (1907) by Bob Cole and James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson provided one of the most important breakthroughs in racial representation through its treatment of a serious love scene between a black man and woman, thus breaking the "love scene taboo." (43) The love scene taboo was one of the barriers used to argue that African Americans "did not experience the full spectrum of human emotions" as did Whites, thereby justifying Black subjugation. (Seniors 43) Importantly, the Johnsons chose to script love scenes without minstrel dialect. Toll is accurate regarding the import of romantic scene between black men and women.<sup>80</sup> However, Dunbar, and Cook established this convention prior to 1907, through a series of musical plays (in truth one play with three different iterations)<sup>81</sup> that played with a like selectivity of dialect. *Jes Lak White F'lks: A One Act Negro Operetto* (1900); *The Cannibal King* (1901, 1914); and *In Dahomey* (1903) share a plot and basic character types as well as music and lyrics (again by Paul Laurence Dunbar).

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<sup>80</sup> Related, producers initially shy away from supporting F. E. Miller, Aubrey Lyles, Noble Sissle, and Eubie Blake's *Shuffle Along*, citing the serious love song in the production.

<sup>81</sup> There are character name changes, as well as subtle shifts in the plot.

These scripts, however, use dialect differently from its blackface predecessors as each anticipated mixed if not entirely Black audiences.

With *In Dahomey*, Mandy, the daughter of a successful middle class Negro named Pompous Johnson, rebels against her father's nuptial plans and falls in love with a head waiter (Wait R. Shufflefood). While the bulk of the script is written in dialect, conversations between Wait and Mandy use Standard American English. Similarly in *The Cannibal King*, Mandy (now renamed Parthenia) and Jerry, converse in Standard English. Importantly, the selective omission of dialect places Black romance outside of the realm of the ridiculous. It suggests an emotional literacy for Black character(s) unheard of on the minstrel stage. Accordingly, the intimate moments stand out as authentic moments in the sea of absurd minstrel-like dialect. Effectively through language and voice, Shipp challenges the narrow conception of Blackness inherent in minstrelsy's purported use of "authentic" (in the progressive lingo of the day) Negroes. The writers first reground the idea of authenticity simply by staging familiar moments from Black life. Scripting these moments without minstrel dialect further positioned "authentic" Negro life outside of the minstrel mold of Black buffoonery. (Krasner, *Resistance* 65)<sup>82</sup>

Productions such as *Shuffle Along* (1921) used these sonic strategies to achieve success among mixed audiences, and establish new conventions for Black and White musical theater makers in the U.S. New, crossover shows continued to appeal to fans of blackface plantation minstrelsy through their use of the faux-*Negroisms* commonly found in blackface minstrelsy (that is, dialect, malapropisms, burnt cork, and stereotypic characterization). But the crossovers found popularity among Black audiences that White

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<sup>82</sup> David Krasner also points out how the opening song by Snowball, a "Negro elder" uses language and music of Black church to surreptitiously deliver a message of hope and deliverance. Krasner notes that dialect again masks a subversive message, using what Eric Sundquist calls the shadow language of Black dialect. (308) In performance, the linguistic masquerade deepens because the text is musically transmitted through the sound of the spiritual.

minstrelsy seldom achieved. David Krasner suggests that Black audiences may have understood that "a certain degree of bowing and scraping was necessary for the success of the performer, and so they accepted performers of their own race blacking-up." (Krasner, Pageant 264) Certainly seeing Black performers in mainstream venues, and knowing that Black performers were succeeding financially appealed to New Negro sensibilities. But the inclusion of post-ragtime jazz, contemporary dance, and Black on Black romance in early Black musicals may also have appealed to African American audiences on the simply basis of supply and demand. While still rife with negative stereotypes, the inclusion of musical genres popular within African American communities, and the introduction of realistic, empathetic characters signified that some part of this new entertainment had been crafted "for us," and for Black pleasure. While Krasner's observation certainly holds some truth, part of the appeal to Black audiences might also have rested in the fact that Cook and Dunbar, Walker and Williams, Miller and Lyles, and Sissle and Blake had found entertainments Black audiences *wanted* to consume.

Finally, Black theater, through its immersion in "Black-friendly" dialogue and music choices, became increasingly consumed by Black audiences, and marked a shift in the audience performer dynamic. Despite the continued use of comedic dialect and even greasepaint, Black musical theater diminished (though it did not erase) the menace of racial degradation in a way that White minstrelsy could not. The audience performer dynamic changes where there is a Black visual and sonic presence on stage, a Black visual and sonic presence in the house, and a sonic saturation of the space between them with sounds familiar to each. Under such conditions, the theater becomes a community, and for the moment, individuals may find a shield from the Othering they face in the larger society. Caricature wears funny pants and carries a poisoned blade. But the venomous quality of caricature rests on its ability to explode isolated idiosyncrasies, imagined or real, into dehumanizing portraits of otherness.

The shield of community can momentarily deflect this element, particularly when

the group, by way of the fine print, of the social contract, that is the willing suspension of disbelief, exists as a single listening body. Community is, in a basic sense, an acknowledgement that its members are not Others. Immersed in that single auditing body, even the most demeaning caricatures; cease to be about “me” as an individual. This idea of reception certainly has its limits, but it may help to explain why, even within contemporary theater, Black audiences can not only endure, but enjoy stage plays filled with clear stereotypes and caricatures. It is as Chude-Sokei notes, rather effortless to chalk these caricatures up as worthless, and in the same motion, discount the pleasure of audiences that enjoy them as proof of ignorance or of an audience’s lack of cultural sophistication. In fact, Louis Chude-Sokei holds that with the performances of Walker and Williams, racial caricatures represented an opportunity for class-based critique, a revolt against the “a severe and elaborate mockery of the pretension and pomp of the Negro elite.” (261) What I suggest instead is that in a relatively friendly theatrical environment, in a space where a spectator is not already immediately Othered prior to the curtain, a collective distancing of identity from stereotypical characterizations can emerge for the duration of the play, the scene, or even the individual joke. In this environment, “I” am not the Other, and this simply deflection of personalized insult allows the inherent comedic elements of stereotypes (exaggeration, excess, amplification, and incongruity) to rise to the surface in performance.

#### **“LIKE TIGHTENING VIOLIN STRINGS”**

Other artists pursued the call for authenticity by reconsidering dialect rather than omitting it. Two other factors influenced the folk dramatists and performers during the Harlem Renaissance on the approach to dialect. First, the “Folk Ideal” held sway over many artists and thinkers during the Harlem Renaissance. The Renaissance was a part of a larger modernist movement that spanned the art world irrespective of race. Race did, however, hold a particular significance, especially with regard to Primitivism, the idea that modern society had lost the emotional, instinctual and holistic capacity of “pre-

industrial” civilizations. In Europe and in the United States, African American cultural expression represented a local primitive source for Black and White artists alike. Through its lens, then, Locke would understand the Black spiritual not only as moving, but as creative “ore” awaiting fabrication by the future composers.

In some ways, the primitivist love of [an imagined] Old Negro, was as debilitating to New Negro art as the blackface tradition. Jon Michael Spencer argues that one obstacle to a more assertive break with the old Negro was that fact that the White patrons of the Renaissance —notably Carl Van Vechten and Charlotte Osgood Mason— were endeared to the old Negro. The primitivist inclination of early American modernists imagined Blacks as bearers of a primitive, unadulterated cultural force that could reinvigorate all of Western society. By sponsoring African American cultural reclamation in the works of Locke, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston, figures like Van Vechten and Mason hoped to infuse White America with a creative tonic that might prove potent enough to counter the forces of capitalism and industry. Once again, voice occupied a central concern in the struggle over Black identity. Spencer writes:

Vocally, not only was dialect a mark of primitivist worth, but related, the degree to which a performer’s voice sounded untrained. Mason’s opinion of Robeson in comparison to concert singer Roland Hayes: Robeson’s renditions of the spirituals were for a time sufficiently primitive for Mason because he sang them with that deep voice without the edge of refinement that distinguished the renditions of Hayes. (14)

Spencer points to the way both Van Vechten and Mason encouraged the use of dialect in spirituals. This was in contrast to James Weldon Johnson who omitted dialect in the opening sermon of *Gods Trombone* because, in his words, “The Negro poet in the United States... needs now an instrument of greater range than dialect.” (8) Van Vechten, however, insisted that the retention of dialect in the spirituals was of utmost importance to their successful rendering and that spirituals sung in grammatical English were the farthest removed from the “true spirit” of the folk originals.” (Spencer 4) Hurston was also concerned with the distance of spirituals from the “true spirit” of Black

folks, but for her it was a matter of venue rather than form. For Hurston, the dislocation of such folk creations destroyed their authenticity, not the use or non use of dialect. Hurston critiques “neo-spirituals” and the artificial derivation of “concert hall and glee-club rendition.” “Renovated spirituals” Hurston says, “are a valuable contribution to the musical literature, but they are not the genuine thing. Let no one imagine they are the true songs of the people as sung by them.” (Hurston, *Spirituals and Neo Spirituals* 474)

Yet despite the conflict over primitivist approaches, a folk aesthetic emerged at the core of the New Negro movement as Black modernism’s version of primitivism. This folk orientation rejected the fictionalized sound of plantation minstrelsy as caricature, and rejected the Black elite’s disdain for anything but standard American English. Instead, after modernisms thirst for “authenticity,” the folk ideal valued the peasant ethos brought to the city by rural migration. The new demand for authenticity pressed dramatists and performers to approach dialect with a more anthropological ear, as Zora Neale Hurston notes:

If we are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect and the burnt-cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of "ams" and "Ises." Fortunately, we don't have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself. (Hurston, *Characteristics of Negro Expression* 307)

At the same time, the Irish National Theater, housed at the Abbey Theater in Dublin, and the Yiddish theater in the United States provided important alternative models for theorists of New Negro Theater. Notably, these theatrical movements demonstrated the ability for a people to define themselves through language in performance. But the Irish National Theater, particularly in the work of William Butler Yeats and John M. Synge, used language and voice to forge identity through a stylized realism that heightened the beauty of the ordinary. In the case of the Irish national theater, Synge and his compatriot playwrights elevated Hiberno-English dialects into high art. In a similar way, Willis Richardson and Randolph Edmonds, African American playwrights of folk dramas, sought to encase the sound of “authentic” racial identity in



serious, dramatic works for the “legitimate stage.”<sup>83</sup> Richardson writes:

Every phase of life may be depicted in Negro drama... the lives of the educated with their perfect language and manners may be shown as well as the lives and problems of the less fortunate who still use the dialect... we have learned the English language, but the dialect of the slave days is still the mother tongue of the American Negro.” (Richardson 354)

Richardson comments on the conventions of the Talented Tenth as much as he colludes with them in framing the “common Negro” as a user of dialect. But his application of dialect does show a shift in favor of dialect. The New Negro held the “common Negro” as *folksy*, authentic, and culturally valuable. This dialect based sense of sounding Black, then, as Leslie Sanders points out, connected characters on stage with the “middle class audience” that came to the theater. As such, the dramatic work of Richardson, along with Hughes, Hurston, and Spence, demonstrates that the New Negro perception of voice lay in the use of dialect for sentimental rather than comic ends. (Sanders 31-32)

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF NEGRO EXPRESSION: “LET 'EM SEARCH”

Hurston’s approach to the reclamation of Black vocality is deft mix of anthropological analysis and primitivist sympathies undercut by ~~mother’s~~ mama’s wit. She begins by charting the evolution of human linguistics from “close fitting,” descriptive words into conceptual, referential words (e.g. from “That-which-we-squat-on” into “chair.”) She then asserts that *the Negro* extends the evolution of language, specifically of English, by adding further action to language, turning “chair” into “sitting-chair.” For Hurston, this embellishment of English is not the result of illiteracy, but rather an inclination for adornment based on residual African aesthetic and philosophical impulses. The “will to adorn” in Hurston’s analysis, is one of the primary characteristics

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<sup>83</sup> The American Little Theater Movement, through which White playwright Paul Green won a Pulitzer for *In Abraham’s Bosom* (1927), encouraged playwrights to “draw on local landscape, people, and language.” It proved a viable model for new Black theater. (Sanders 19)

of Black expression. As such, she counts the use of metaphor, simile, double descriptive, and verbal nouns as hallmarks of Black vocality, and as Black contributions to English.<sup>84</sup>

Alongside dynamic suggestion (the sense of anticipation and potential) and the fusion of asymmetry, rhythm, and angularity, Hurston suggests that the deep seated will to adorn generates the style of speech and performance that authenticates Black expression. Black people have adorned the English language in such a way that it has become foreign to the non-Black speaker. Hurston then expands the scope of adorned expression. She notes that beyond language, “Negro material” (music, humor, and dance) resists imitation by those from outside of the traditions. She notes:

Speaking of the use of Negro material by White performers, it is astonishing that so many are trying it, and I have never seen one yet entirely realistic. They often have all the elements of the song, dance, or expression, but they are misplaced or distorted by the accent falling on the wrong element. Everyone seems to think that the Negro is easily imitated when nothing is further from the truth. Without exception I wonder why the Black-face comedians are Black-face; it is a puzzle—good comedians, but darn poor niggers. Gershwin and the other "Negro" rhapsodists come under this same axe. Just about as Negro as caviar or Ann Pennington's athletic Black Bottom. When the Negroes who knew the Black Bottom in its cradle saw the Broadway version they asked each other, "Is you learnt dat new Black Bottom yet?" Proof that it was not their dance... And God only knows what the world has suffered from the White damsels who try to sing Blues. (Hurston, *Characteristics of Negro Expression* 306)

Hurston is not done. While critiquing the attempts of White performers to reproduce Black expression, she remains equally critical of Black artists and intellectuals (whether in collusion with Whites or acting independently) who excise Black expressions from the gardens that foster them. For Hurston, the Fisk, Tuskegee, and Hampton Singers as well as attempts at the creation of “Black Theaters” remain disingenuous. To Hurston’s ear, the “Glee Club style” betrays the true form of Black vocal sound, and fails to present “the songs as the Negro song makers sing them.” With keen wit, Hurston

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<sup>84</sup> See Figure 3, Zora Neale Hurston's Examples of Linguistic Adornment.

waves off the Jubilee singers and New Negro elite, saying “Let 'em search” for the things that the Negro “farthest down” enjoys once or twice a week. In Hurston’s view, authentic Black expression exists only in the “unfashionable Negro church” and “in the Jooks and the cabarets.” (Hurston, *Characteristics of Negro Expression* 307) Far from authentic, “Black Theaters” and song in “Glee Club style” are packaged for White or Black middle class audiences. These exercises in re-gifting simply reinforced Black authenticity as “low class” and by association “non-urban.” It paved the road for later ideas of authenticity wherein urban becomes associated with “low class,” and suburban becomes a place of Black middle class respectability. By the late twentieth century, these trends from New Negro collide with the political aesthetics of Black Arts to create Hip Hop’s authenticity, situated in an urban Blackness.

### **Black Arts Vocal Theory**

The years between the height of the New Negro Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement proved fertile ground for the development of new theories on Black vocalicity in theatrical performance. Prior to the Renaissance, concert spirituals and super-respectability battled the sinister tomfoolery of blackface dialect. The artists of the Renaissance, Hurston in particular, rejected both approaches. New Negroes opted to record dialect rather than invent it, and to see drama in the “the Jooks and the cabarets,” rather than package Blackness for the concert halls of Europe. Importantly, the old associations Black vocalicity carried (dialect, blackface minstrelsy, super-respectability, and the spiritual) did not fade away. Rather, by the 1940s, Black sound had simply grown to include the blues and its jargon, jazz and its slang, and a far more precise catalogue of Black colloquial speech to its constellation of meanings. This transformation of what it meant to sound Black continued over the next three decades.

Theatrically, Renaissance artists had not undone the use of other than Standard English for Black characters. But they had managed to broaden and shift the associations

connected to dialect. In addition, the expanding net of Black vocal sound accompanied a broader aesthetic shift from cultural awakening to nationalist stirrings. The Black Arts Movement would find a new, deeply political role for the voice. As a theatrical tradition, the Black Arts Movement represented a reclamation of African American and Diasporic cultural expression. But it also reverberated out of the Federal theater project where Negro Theater Units had embedded conventional theatrical production within Black communities, and helped to politicize future generations of theater artists.<sup>85</sup> The taste for agit-prop theater making meant an appetite for “proletarian” themes, characters, and plots in Black theater from 1935.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, however, African American theater makers increasingly saw even these “proletarian” plots, characters, and themes as derivative of European and Euro-American models.

The early critical successes of Lorraine Hansberry, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, and Adrienne Kennedy were tainted by the sense that Black American artistic achievement, like Hansberry’s Younger family, “pays for its integration into the American middle class by losing its ethnicity.” (Fabre 14) Black writers were writing Western plays with Black characters. Baraka and Kennedy emerged from the White avant-garde camps which were pushing against their own middle class paradigms. Integration was depleting Negro Theater units that had established themselves in Black communities. In all, there was a sense within the first few years of the sixties, that integration might also mean dissolution. Into this matrix of aspiration and anxiety,

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<sup>85</sup> Actress Rose McClendon advocated the establishments of these community theater groups as a part of the New Deal to re-employ those displaced by the economic turmoil of the 1930s, but also as a means of protesting blackface and stereotypes and the exclusion of Blacks from professional training. By 1936 nearly twenty five cities hosted the units, and nearly one million black theater makers had been hired. (Fabre 9)

<sup>86</sup> Some Black theater groups in existence between 1935 and 1955 included: 1937 Harlem Suitcase Theater (1937); Rose McClendon Players (1937); American Negro Theater (1940); Negro Playwrights (1940); Council of Harlem Theaters (1940); Harlem Showcase (1940), Committee for the Negro in the Arts (1940); Elks Community Theater (1940); Penthouse Players (1940); Negro Arts Players (1952).

theorist/artists authorized sound and voice as means of carving out a unique aesthetic of social consciousness.

The New Negro artists had demonstrated the capacity for language to connote cultural distinction, both through dialogue, and through a linguistic investment in the Folk and in the music and quotidian stylings of the Black South. Similarly, BAM poets and playwrights searched “The People” for a dramatic voice that would best express their personal as well as their collective sense of identity. At the same time, the Black Power Movement began forging itself through a reconsideration of language, the business of poets and playwrights. Consequently, the Black Aesthetic identified by Addison Gayle served as midwife to the Black Power movement; not surprisingly, each featured sound and voice as an increasingly important hallmark of Blackness.

#### **SING NEW SONGS; PURIFY OLD ONES: THE BLACK AESTHETIC**

What evolved by 1968, was a new aesthetic, a Black Aesthetic. BAM theorists held that the Western tradition, literary and individualistic, stifled Black creativity. Instead, Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Addison Gayle, Sonia Sanchez, Barbara Ann Teer and others advocated an aesthetic that rooted the artist in her/his community and whose artistic production was focused on the political condition of Black people. To that end, Black Arts poets and playwrights offered a unique ritualized combination of expression based on African-American cultural traditions. The resultant Black Aesthetic aspired to be, as Haki Madhubuti theorizes, a mix of cultural tradition and political orientation in a new, sonically disposed poetics:

Polyrhythmic, uneven short explosive lines;  
Intensity; depth yet simplicity; spirituality, yet flexibility;  
Irony; humor; signifying;  
Sarcasm—a new comedy;  
Direction; positive movement; teaching, nation-building;  
Subject matter—concrete; reflects a collective and personal lifestyle;  
Music: the unique use of vowel and consonants with the developed rap  
demands that the poetry be real, and read out loud. (240)

Through poetry and dramatic literature, Black Arts vocal theory intoned new associations for the Black voice: the privileging of the spoken over the written; call and response modes borrowed from Black spiritual practices; the entanglement of vulgarity as a linguistic trait; and the use of non-linguistic sounds inspired by free jazz.

Black Arts vocal theory first held that the Black voice resisted the constraints of Western tradition unlike any other expressive tool. In performance, it heard Black vocality as an antithesis to European traditions of written literature, and by extension, in contrast with Whiteness itself. (Ongiri 117) In true Romantic fashion, Black Arts vocal theory understood the written word to be an impediment to Truth, that is, the Truth which truly encompassed Black existence, and the historio-political realities of Africans in the Americas. Those realities were dynamic— a consciousness doubled, a survival by improvisation; a disenfranchisement of essential habitués. Amiri Baraka articulated his aversion to the written word in a 1980 interview with William J Harris, questioning the reach and the future of written poetry:

The page doesn't interest me that much — not as much as the actual spoken word. . . . and I think that the whole wave of the future is definitely not literary . . . The question to me of a poet writing in silence for people who will read in silence and put it in a library where the whole thing is conceived in silence and lost forever in silence is about over. (Harris, An Interview with Amiri Baraka)

Thus, in Baraka's view, the dynamism of speech gives lie to what Kimberley Benston calls the "spurious permanence" of the page. (Benston 192) Baraka overturned writing as the ephemeral mode through an alchemical conclusion, blending the constant presence of speech with the ephemeral quality of performance. Writing, in his view, was destined to disappear into the archive because writing arrests language even as history streams past it. Conversely, spoken words signal a still-breathing language.

Here, Benston suggests, the perpetual disappearance of language when it is *performed* creates permanence by way of a relentless interrogation *and* transformation of the identity of both speaker and listener. (192) Baraka and his contemporaries did not

want to document the world. Rather, the black avant-garde wanted an art that moved the world. To that end, they constructed an aesthetic of action and extroversion that served as a critical methodology for political agitation. The voice, undermines the hegemony of textual literacy, yet more importantly, *utterance* replaces the written text (seen as predominantly European and unflattering of the African) as the new “ontological grounding” of Black identities. (Sell 280) Indeed, the *act* of speaking, as much as the thing spoken, became the thing that re-inscribed Blackness.

Hence, utterance, as an act of resistance, was a significant aspect of voice contributing to Black Arts vocal theory. bell hooks reminds us:

For us, true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act—as such it represents a threat. To those who wield oppressive power, that which is threatening must necessarily be wiped out, annihilated, silenced. (hooks, Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black 8)

For a people mired in second class citizenship and plagued by domestic terrorism, the simple act of speaking is revolutionary. The voice, be it in the streets *or* in performance, declares the presence of a body and opens the door to self definition. Aesthetically, performance turned the *ineffectual* words-of-the-page into the *effectual*, political gesture hooks names: true speaking. Thus, as Sherry Brennan notes, utterance politicizes dramatic or poetic material because the vocal performance transforms both the speaker and what is spoken into self determining entities. (229) In making language present, immediate, and embodied through utterance, the performer enlivens the listener(s), turning the individual moment of self determination into a collective act of resistance. It is no wonder then that theatrical activity— that which turns the written into the spoken— was so central to BAM and the Black Aesthetic. Theater opened revolutionary rhetoric to the emotional participation of the audience.

Logically then, the committed and political theater found audience reciprocity an essential convention. Both the Free Southern Theater (1963) and the Black Arts

Repertory Theater (1965) attempted to theatrically incorporate principles of audience reciprocity learned in Black churches. The Free Southern Theater, for instance, not only partnered with Black churches, but modeled the theater experience after the church experience. (Fabre 17) Accordingly, this cycling of sound between audience and performer, common across Black spiritual experiences, suddenly had a sanctioned place in the formal theatre.

In this way, Black Arts fixed vocal reciprocity in its dramaturgical tool box. And perhaps more importantly, it established call and response vocality as an identitarian signature of Black political performance. To the expanding definition of sounding Black in performance, then, Black Arts vocal theory added the act of dissolving the fourth wall with strident, didactic voices unafraid and unashamed to be “in your face.” Black theatrical vocal sound incorporated polyphony into its meaning, individual voices accompanied by and affirmed by other voices. The Black voice came to signify a boisterous collective sound, eroding the gulf between performer and spectator. The Black voice, at the very least, meant a voice that anticipated feedback. The inclusion of audience in performance made sound not only the medium of exchange, but established it as chief among the many languages of the stage.

From its Federal Theater roots, the “committed and political” theater of the 1960s evolved from a desire to raise the consciousness of the audience. As the most social art form, Black theaters sought to establish themselves as identity-defining institutions in which the community ritually renamed itself and discovered its own borders. The cycling of vocal sound between audience and performer established the kinds of communal bonds that were central to Black Arts’ political agenda. But Neal, for instance, felt that Black vocality was also capable of defending the integrity of Blackness itself. As a guarantor of “community coherence,” voice and speech could be used to secure Black creativity from commodification. BAM artists added vulgarity and verbal violence as a way to further guard against casual appropriations. Vulgarity and confrontational utterance connected voice to the street, and thereby to the agile use of



sharp language and profanity.

While garnering popular approval, it was as much a shock and awe tactic as it was a means of “linguistic realism.” After all, Black Arts vocal theory’s use of dialect and vulgarity was meant to alienate not only Whites, but also middle class Black folk, and the middle class aspiration of working class Black people.<sup>87</sup> Vulgarity “proofed” against Black *embourgeoisement* while also obstructing White commodification of Black expression. The impact of swear words only redoubles in public utterance. Inverting the preachment of the Upper Tens, Black Arts artists sought to repudiate respectability. Instead they sought out the “low-down” as a site of ethnic authentication, and engaged a use of obscenity so habitual that swearing became a “linguistic trait” of its own. (Ricard 77-78) Knowing how to sound, be it the use of slang or the appropriate rules for call and response, signaled one’s belonging to the community. In other words, *how you sound[ed]*? was an index of authenticity, and of Blackness. Consequently, in wedding rough language to the struggle over new Black identities, the use of obscenities as a linguistic trait became synonymous with “real” Black speech. After all, no one says *muthafucka* like Samuel L Jackson.

Cussin’ and jookin’, the New Negro poets and playwrights sought to incorporate the low down via the blues. Hurston and Hughes synthesized its “reduplications, rhythm pauses, elisions, double negatives, and rhythms—” into their poetic and dramatic work. (Ricard 76) Blues stood as the quintessence of authentic Black Sound, the poetic stylization of Black colloquial speech. Baraka writes:

The blues is so basic because it is black speech at its earliest complete articulation as a new world speech. The speech of black people native to the Western world... the blues is the actual secular day to day language given the grace of poetry. (Baraka, *The Music* 262)

In the same way, Black Arts poets and playwrights pushed their linguistic forms

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<sup>87</sup> Similar arguments can be made about hip-hop tendencies toward extremes of language, violence, and sexual content as a means of resisting mainstreaming.

to match contemporary Black music, in this case, New Music, or free jazz.<sup>88</sup> William J. Harris argues that “free jazz form and tradition” gave Baraka and the black avant-garde of the 1960s a way back to the ethnic self from middle class, Eurocentric aesthetic training, as the speech of Black Newark that is, a blend of Italian and Jewish idiom was not black enough. It took, what Harris calls, a meta-Blackness in free jazz to satisfy the need for an archetypal, “purified black identity”. (317) Such irony. In the midst of a movement to define and quantify authentic Blackness, Harris posits that the black avant-garde found actual Black speech inauthentic.

Baraka’s *Blues People* (1958) opened the door for free jazz to become the model for spoken performance.<sup>89</sup> The new musical sound combined tradition with the vernacular, and sat aloof from the mainstream, while remaining accessible from the street. In this, both free jazz and blues embodied the changing-same principle fundamental to BAM’s conception of Blackness.<sup>90</sup> As William Harris suggests, the Black Aesthetic observed that to “make it new and, at the same time, make it old,” was a distinctively Black approach to artistic. (Harris, *Sound?* 320) Along these lines, free Jazz recast the blues sound in a progressive form contemporizing a tradition universally regarded, unquestionably Black. Artist like John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Ornette Coleman, and Sun Ra, seemed a vanguard of Afro-futurists rooted in the Black tradition.

Thus, for the poets and playwrights of the Black Arts movement, the project became the translation of the free jazz voice into the poetic and dramatic voice. (Harris, *Sound?* 313) While many were concerned with the ways in which free jazz could

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<sup>88</sup> James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, and August Wilson, coincidentally, each held up Bessie Smith as the prototype of sounding Black.

<sup>89</sup> Kara Keeling and Josh Kun read Baraka’s concern with music as not only aesthetic, but historiographic: “a story of sound and music—an auditory sociology, a people shaped through sound.” (456)

<sup>90</sup> The changing-same aspect of Black music refers to “that cultural continuity that persists in changing forms.” It is the guiding principle behind repetitive polyrhythms, 12 bar blues, and the imperative of improvisation that demands innovative work within tradition. (Harris, *Sound?* 313)

“expand, modernize, and vitalize the Black literary tradition,” its greatest impact was not on how language was written, but on how it was performed. (Harris, *Sound?* 312) Specifically, Black Arts performances mimicked the way free jazz incorporated the extra-musical sounds of the Black sonic tradition, and how it did so in ways assonant with that sonic tradition. Taking its cue from the free jazz deconstruction and re-amalgamation of Black musical tropes, Black arts vocal theory invested in the word-sound-power matrix of Black polyrhythmic textures, overlapping accents, rhymes, shifting emphases, tonal simultaneities, the “conjure mode,” and the rhythmic application of antitheses. Harris notes:

...free jazz is rooted in the African American audio past... it is rooted in the shouts of the Black church and the hollers of the field, sounds saturated with the history of slavery. Furthermore, from its inception to the present, extra-musical sounds, such as shouts, screams, and grunts, have been associated with the Black musical tradition. (Harris, *Sound?* 313)

Ironically, Black arts vocal theory was emulating a music which sought to emulate human speech. The effect often produced poetic utterance that was non-linguistic, yet familiar. Scat-like. Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, for instance, is written like a symphony of shouts, screams, and grunts. Yet its extra-musical and extra-linguistic sonic proximity to the Black church and to the echoes of field hollers really only emerge during its performance. As performed, the listener receives a wall of sound similar to Coltrane’s “saxophonic glissando,” that is inflected with familiar “Black-experience sounds.” Only when the text is uttered can one find the underlying jazz-like pulse that allows the sound to be more than random cacophony.

While Kennedy chronologically falls outside of the Black Arts Movement, her work shows a similar concern for the sonic and an attraction to the non-linguistic. Black arts vocal theory reworked screams, shouts, and hollers as dramaturgical tools to great effect. In its program to unhinge realist aesthetics and literary rationality, the jazz-informed scream operates below the linguistic, yet manages to convey sense and

emotional import. Benston observes:

the scream short circuits convention and meditations disowns institutionalized terms of social exchange, and sounds at the threshold of an apocalypse that would "explode" Blackness into a nigga "cry" of insurrection.... the scream makes sound its own subject, its own aim; thus incarnating the demand for unfettered self-determination via an irruptive 'blow' into the freezing "night" of Diasporic experience, the scream sets in motion a subphonemic counter play to dominant culture's "lust" for "cold" semantic order, allowing signifyin' to overflow signification, roughening the text's fabric as the voice asserts the viscoelastic grain of its restive will. (205-206)

Benston dubs the scream a subphonemic “demand for unfettered self-determination.” Its pre-linguistic quality undermines any demands for logic, sense, and a privileged access to proper English, through what Benston describes as tonal agency. In a way, Black arts vocal theory hypothesizes that Black sound, or more precisely, that sounding Black means an ability to wield—to communicate through non-linguistic yet meaningful sound. It suggests that sounding Black, musically or orally, means operating underneath the literal and the explicit. It infers that sounding Black means leaving space for the listener to enter and help finish the procession of communication. In her discussion of Baraka’s “Black Art,” Sherry Brennan notes how “rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr / rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr ... tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh /... rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr....” makes no linguistic sense. As sound, however, it is airplanes, machine-guns, fire, war, and death. Brennan holds that this Black approach to the sound of language “reorganizes our sense of the English language as it inheres in the world.” (307)

### ***TOMORROW IS THE QUESTION: BLACK ARTS VOCAL THEORY’S AESTHETIC LEGACY***

The legacy of Black Arts Vocal theory engages a larger critical discourse on the quest for cultural identity. Amy Ongiri challenges the idea that BAM’s theorization of Blackness and the Black Aesthetic was a momentary exercise in racial essentialism.

Rather, Ongiri suggests, BAM was the “formative moment” for contemporary African American identity and Black authenticity today. (89) The Black Aesthetic that emerged by the 1970s offered a competing vision of Blackness from that advanced by the Civil Rights Movement. During BAM, contemporary African American identity became decidedly urban, a turn that simultaneously immersed assumptions about Black vocalicity in urban vernacular, urban music, and street poetics. The florid, sermonic oratory of Southern preachers, at times, gestured toward a different future than did the sharp, aggressive wit of North urban street vernacular. (98) In a way, BAM’s definition of Black sound—urban, confrontational, and hip—was a rejection of southern Civil Rights movement’s goals of integration and co-existence.

On the whole, BAM practitioners situated cultural production amid the politics of identity. Over the course of two decades, BAM practitioners changed American understanding of Blackness through a politicization of culture. BAM poets and playwrights sought to use performance as more than entertainment. Rather, using the “transformative power of language,” they sought to incite action and to redefine “community, identity, and authenticity” (90) These efforts to link the quest for identity to artistic production comprise what Ongiri calls a *Poetics Of Community*, that is an aesthetic consciously rooted in the cultural history of a community, and in that community’s contemporary vernacular; an aesthetic constructed and oriented toward the nourishment—political, economic, and spiritual-- of the communities, and one that remains unconcerned with the economic benefit of the individual artist.

The aims of this *Poetics of Community* were both artistic (seeking to free Black expression from stifling and exploitative forms) and political (seeking to free Black people from second class citizenship.) BAM artists, similar to their New Negro predecessors, in the Romantic tradition, heard themselves as a cultural & spiritual vanguard. However, unlike the Talented Tenth, the far more populist BAM artists held that the ideal state of spiritual enlightenment and political consciousness lay not in the uplift of one’s condition, but in the liberation of one’s own Black Self. Inflecting the

voice with new markers of Blackness politicized dramatic performance. It linked theatrical experience to a “persuasive vision of community.” While the Black voice existed in theatrical spaces, it depended on a Blackness of tongue extant in community spaces and in the spectator’s body. It was conceived as performance by “us” and for “us.”

Unfortunately the “us” it sought to authenticate was often a narrow swath of Black subjectivity. While the movement was in ways strategically essentialist, it could also prove patriarchal, homophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-White, and anti-bourgeois. Within a value system so concerned with its borders, Sounding White, sounding Gay, sounding “bougie,” (perhaps even sounding Woman or sounding Jewish) might be regarded as grounds for being excommun(ity)cated. This is, of course, conjecture. But it is important to recognize, as Geneva Smitherman notes that personal linguistic systems can determine inclusion or exclusion within some Black communities:

[That is] while some blacks speak very Black English, there are others who speak very White English, and still others who are competent in both linguistic systems. Historically, black speech has been demanded of those who wish to retain close affinities with the black community, and intrusions of White English are likely to be frowned upon and any black users thereof promptly ostracized by the group. Talkin [sic] proper (trying to sound white) just ain [sic] considered cool. (12)

Smitherman addresses the ways voice is received and of the expectations of identity placed on a speaker based on phonological qualities. Speech remains a significant marker of self-identification and of perceived identities. But as BAM attempted to negate the effects of White supremacist essentialism about Blackness, it often fell into a mirrored position, and the underlying principle of Othering, which makes racist ideology possible in the first place, drove some of its rhetoric. A great deal of BAM idioms hinged on antitheses and divergent definitions of Blackness based on how it was not Whiteness, how it was not effeminate, how it was not homosexual, and how it

was not of the ‘House Negro’ tradition.<sup>91</sup> While instances of linguistic black “paper-bag” testing<sup>92</sup> did not originate in the 1960s, the Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movement, as crucibles of embodiment, voice, and liberation politics, heightened masculine, heteronormative conceptions of authentic Blackness. These same themes weave in and out of Wilson’s scripts and the productions of his plays.

Black Arts vocal theory drew on the musical and the literary, but performance, uniquely situated at the crossroad of voice and text, operated as its praxis. Its theater celebrated the voice, couching it in a nexus of poetic texts and political agendas. The theatrical and poetic voices at work established a number of tropes that allow Blackness to inhere in vocal performance: Logocentrism; anti-textuality; the sensual use of non linguistic yet meaningful vocal sound; the use of obscenities as a linguistic trait; the application of changing-same principles to spoken language; the deployment of vernaculars used by many working class Black people; the application of reduplications; rhythm pauses; elisions; double negatives; and rhythm; and the regard shown to utterance.

As the Black Arts Movement became the Afrocentric approach in the 1970s, and new sonic ideals emerged with the evolution of Hip Hop, Black performing artist, in theater, television, and film discovered new challenges and new opportunities for voice as

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<sup>91</sup> See for instance Baraka’s work “Black Art” or “A Poem for Black Arts.”

<sup>92</sup> A reference to the practice of checking someone’s complexion against the tone of a brown paper bag. Any complexions darker than the bag meant exclusion from the club, school, sorority, fraternity, etc. The coming of the “natural and the positive image affirmations by Black folks during the 1960s were tremendously important progressive moves. Yet as with any ideological revolution, BAM aesthetics had its share of overspill, such as the inversion of the complexion test. As Smitherman notes, the era experienced a modification to the politics of complexion where “the more black in skin color, the more indigenously African in thought and culture.” (41) In considering the aural corollary, it is interesting to listen to the progressive “darkening” of Baraka’s diction from his Beat years through his Black Nationalist years. Does an evolving sense of personal identity manifest in one’s habitual accent?

a site of racial meaning. My two case studies, however, remain informed by sonic practices pre-dating this new era of Black vocality. Rather than extend my historical preface beyond Black Arts vocal theory, in the next chapter, I will examine my first case study, the 1995 for CBS Hallmark Hall of Fame production of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson draws on New Negro aesthetics in his application of folk authenticity in voicing characters. He also attempts to conjure musical form through the structure and sound of his dialogue in the spirit of BAM's experiments free jazz. Through a reading of the production, I investigate the theory of Black sonicity, and the way Wilson as a playwright and screenplay writer experiments with a cross pollination of sonic practices from across African American cultural expression— blues music and African American homiletic traditions in particular— to provide prosodic models for his cast.



## CHAPTER 4, THE SECOND TRADITION: BLACK SONICITY AND VOICE IN AUGUST WILSON'S *THE PIANO LESSON*

### *The Piano Lesson*

*The Piano Lesson* is August Wilson's fifth play in The Pittsburgh Cycle, and the second play for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The story, like the others of the cycle, is set in Pittsburgh's Hill District, and this drama unfolds in the Charles household in 1936. The story centers on two siblings, Boy Willie and Berniece Charles, in dispute over the fate of an heirloom piano. Robert Sutter, the plantation owner who owned their ancestors, used their great-grandmother and grandfather as currency to pay for the piano. Their carved faces adorn the instrument. Boy Willie's and Berniece's father was murdered by a white mob after he, and his brothers Doaker and Wining Boy "liberated" the piano from Sutter's home. At the top of the play, Boy Willie and his friend Lymon have just arrived in Pittsburgh after an 800 mile voyage north from Sunflower Co., Mississippi. One of Sutter's descendents recently died falling after down a well, and his ghost begins to haunt the Hill District house shortly before Boy Willie arrives. Boy Willie wants to sell the piano, now sitting in the parlor of the Pittsburgh homestead, and use the money to buy Sutter's land in Mississippi, the plantation where his ancestors had lived and worked as slaves. Berniece wants to keep the piano in the Pittsburg home. Wilson, inspired by a Romare Bearden painting also entitled *The Piano Lesson*, examines the interplay of self worth, economic aspirations, and heritage. The play depicts the struggle of this African American family against the legacy of slavery, whether to embrace it, and how to overcome it and remain spiritually intact. Sandra Shannon observes:

"This work, however, does not mimic the sometimes explosive, seemingly random plotting or the large cast of its predecessor. Instead it is a lesson carefully focused on two related questions: What do you do with your

legacy, and how do you best put it to use?” (146)

Speech, voice, language are a big part of that legacy. Wilson has chosen not to deny those sounds, but to create a space for them in mainstream American dramatic tradition.

### **PRODUCTION HISTORY**

The *Piano Lesson* was first presented as a reading in 1987 at the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, CT. Director Lloyd Richards<sup>93</sup> then staged a full production later that year which opened on 26 November 1987 at the Yale Repertory Theatre. The cast included Carl Gordon as Doaker, Samuel L Jackson as Boy Willie, Rocky Carroll as Lymon, Starletta DuPois as Berniece, Cheneé Johnson and Ylonda Powell as Maretha, Tommy Hollis as Avery, Lou Myers as Wining Boy, and Sharon Washington as Grace. Richards then mounted a second production which opened 9 January 1988 at the Huntington Theatre Company in Boston.

Richards retained much of the original cast, adding Jaye Skinner as Maretha and the important addition of Charles S. Dutton as Boy Willie. After positive reviews, Richards opened a third iteration of the production on 16 April 1990 at the Walter Kerr Theatre on Broadway in New York City. Apryl R. Foster was recast as Maretha, Lisa Gay Hamilton was cast for Grace, and S. Epatha Merkerson took over the role of Berniece. The production garnered several major theatrical awards and nominations including a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play (1990), a New York Drama Critics'

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<sup>93</sup> Lloyd Richards was a guiding force behind the play from its first reading through the made for television version. Richards' career spanned six decades from his Biblical recitations on Sunday mornings and discovery of Shakespeare in middle school to his stewardship of the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Theatre Center. Among his many achievements, Richards received a Tony Award in 1984 for direction in *Fences*, a National Medal of the Arts (1993), and the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize (October 2002). Richards was instrumental in the development of many theater artists through the NEC, NYU, Boston University, Yale and the O'Neill Center. His collaboration with August Wilson changed the face of contemporary American theater.

Circle Award for Best Play (1990), a Peabody Award (1995), and the 1990 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

### **THE TELEPLAY**

In 1995 Wilson scripted a teleplay version of the play for CBS Hallmark Hall of Fame. It was nominated for two Emmy Awards, one for Outstanding Made for Television Movie (1995) and one for Outstanding Television Movie or Mini-Series (1996). The Wilson-Richards collaboration continued to steer the project, though the teleplay saw additional changes to the cast. Richards introduced Courtney B. Vance as Lymon, Howard University alumnus Rosalyn Coleman as Grace, and Zelda Harris as the young Maretha Charles. Richards then cast on-screen talent Alfre Woodard in the role of Berniece. The teleplay also included additional performers as it featured flashbacks to slavery as well as location shots only alluded to in the stage play.

The television version of the work remains thematically close to its stage predecessor and adheres to the same narrative. The telescript is significantly shorter, running 98 minutes. Written for Hallmark, Wilson also excised most of the profanity. Most notably the patterned use of “nigger,” a marker Wilson uses for verbal authenticity in the original, is completely absent from the teleplay. With regard to setting, the flexibility of television allowed Wilson and Richards to include location shots. We witness Boy Willie and Lymon en route to Pittsburgh, their visit to Avery at the Gulf Building, and even see Berniece working as a domestic servant polishing chandeliers in someone else’s home. Similarly, the power to splice and edit allowed Richards to insert back-story scenes explaining the piano’s history. This is significant because one of the trademarks of Wilson’s dramaturgy is the solo: long, storytelling monologue. Richards stages the sale of Mama Berniece and Papa Boy Walter where originally Doaker told the story through a two page monologue. While the adaptation has Carl Gordon as Doaker narrating over the scenes, the visual primacy afforded by television and film relegates the oral tradition event to the background.

## SCRIPTING DIALOGUE

It is easy to take for granted that in a Black play with Black actors, the speech would reflect conventional Black speech patterns and use AAE. But as I tell my students, actors have choices, as do directors and playwrights. To a large extent, Wilson directs with the pen. Wilson uses standard American English spellings of words, unlike that found in minstrel scripts or even in those of Hurston, Hughes or Baraka. Sandra Shannon notes the absence of dialect even in Wilson's early work before his ear for dialogue fully developed. Of Wilson's *The Homecoming* (1976) about bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson, she writes:

However, he does not tamper much with the written word to denote southern, backwoods dialect. For example, he does not use "hya" for "here" or "Yassuh" for "Yessir." In fact, with the exception of an occasional "naw" or "nossir" or "usta," the conversations of both Leroy and Obadiah could have taken place virtually anywhere in the United States. (Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* 40)

In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson scripts "before" rather than "befo" or nigger rather than "nigga." With the latter in particular, one's pronunciation changes meaning significantly.<sup>94</sup> While he does not clip and respell individual words, he writes using grammatical constructions recognized as native to AAE. So, for example, *as written*, one of Boy Willie's line reads "Doaker know this one," or another as "if he don't like his job, he need to set his bucket down." Wilson indicates the direction vocal sound will take, though the actors and director must still make a choice as to how to execute Wilson's words.

Wilson required not only the power of the spoken word, but the power of a Black spoken word to complete the ritual of his theater. It is not enough for his characters to speak at length. They also speak with the rhythms of blues people. Wilson's ear for

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<sup>94</sup> I will return to a discussion of word in chapter five, specifically of the important connotative distinction between *nigger*, with a hard rhotic ending, and *niggah(a)*, with its mid-central vowel finish.

dialogue is oft lauded though it seems something he discovered late in his development as a writer. As Wilson notes:

In Pittsburgh it was a question of not being able to see the forest for the trees. The reason I couldn't write dialogue was because I didn't respect the way Blacks talked. I didn't see a value in it. I was always trying to alter the language into something else. So I asked a friend how to make characters talk and he said, you don't. You listen to them. I thought he was being funny at the time but it actually turned out to be one of the most profound things he has ever said to me. (Bigsby 13)

Ben Brantley observes the "rich idiomatic language," of Wilson's characters "a poeticized vernacular descended from the coves of the Hill [Hill District, Pittsburgh]." (H5) Lloyd Richards, who often found issue with Wilson's plots and staging demands, found that within Wilson's dialogue, "the language and the metaphors sang to me." (1) In a 1990 review of *The Piano Lesson*, New York Times critic Frank Rich observed that the text of the play "seems to sing even when it is talking." Rich goes on to describe Wilson's dialogue with musical descriptors.<sup>95</sup>

Hilary DeVries Christian Science Monitor, (October 16, 1984) also comments on the musicality of Wilson's language, noting how "Wilson's fecund use of language borders on the musical." (29) And Anita Gates' review of a recent production of Wilson's play *Jitney* by the Two River Theater Company in Red Bank, NJ, similarly describes the "lyrical language" of the play. (10) DeVries use of fecund here is a bit off

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<sup>95</sup> Rich writes:

Still, the play's real music is in the language, all of which is gloriously served by the ensemble company that Mr. Richards has assembled and honed during the more than two years that "The Piano Lesson" has traveled to New York by way of the country's resident theaters. Carl Gordon, as an uncle who has spent 27 years working for the railroad, and Lou Myers, as another uncle who has hit his own long road as a traveling musician, trade tall and small tales of hard-won practical philosophy, political wisdom, women and whisky -some of them boisterously funny, others unexpectedly touching. At other moments, their colloquial verbal cadences trail off seamlessly into riffs of actual song, whether piano blues or roof-raising vocal harmonies, that expresses their autobiographies of pride, defiance and suffering as eloquently as their words." (13, Col. 4)

putting, and beside Gates' and Rich's insistence on the musicality of Wilson's language, stirs up the longstanding assumption of an inherent musicality among Black people. Such comments even lead me to question the position of my own thesis pursuing a theory of Black sonicity; that is, does seeking sound (musical) connections across Black cultural productions reinforce the stereotype of inherent Black musicality? But Wilson's comments a few lines later in the interview temper my immediate reaction about any inference of "ethnic reputation" for African American artists. Wilson notes, "Blacks have generally been considered deficient in the language arts. The general attitude... has been towards blacks, if you're dealing in language arts, you're not very adept." (DeVries 29) In the end, though it does at times seem informed by music, Wilson's work is literary, not musical.

Jabari Asim's review of Sandra Shannon's *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* offers a more nuanced observation of the connection between Wilson's language and music, a more detailed, critical path which I seek to emulate in this project. Asim positions Wilson's dialogue solidly in the Western canon alongside Shakespeare, Eugene O'Neill, David Mamet, Amiri Baraka, and Ntozake Shange—"playwrights, achieving a certain musicality of language." Asim suggests that Wilson's "blues speak" represents a structure, word choice, and cadence not universally Black, but specific to a tradition (musical and philosophical) maintained by a particular community of African Americans, "born and bred in the Delta." (X04)

Finally, Shannon herself describes the qualities of Wilson's dialogue:

"Rather than force manufactured dialogue into his characters' mouths, he allowed them to assume a life of their own . . . Once Wilson overcame the tendency to manipulate his characters in obvious ways, their speech became infinitely more credible." (28)

Importantly, Shannon offers a perspective on Wilson's growth as a writer of dialogue. Shannon analyzes Wilson's early plays with the Pittsburgh Black Horizon's Theater (1968-71), his work as a script writer for the Minnesota Science Museum (1978-

1980), the first iteration of *Jitney* (1979) and his initial contact with the Minneapolis Playwright's Center in 1980. Shannon describes the progress as moving from "unwieldy storylines" and "unrealistic dialogue" to an "ability to listen" and "write realistic dialogue." (173)

Just as Wilson's characters often struggle to find their own song;<sup>96</sup> it seems the playwright had to find the right pitch of his own voice. Ironically, only "in that silence" after leaving his hometown for Minneapolis where he was isolated from "the way that Black folks talked" did he recall the music of Black speech. Full circle— Wilson's development reflects a reoccurring theme in his work, and what the playwright posits as central to African American liberation: knowledge of self. For Wilson, finding his song meant finally hearing the melody of Black speech, and of the place from which he came. His use of everyday dialogue connects these characters to everyday Black people in his audience, to reinforce the central tenant of his dramaturgy—Black liberation begins with recognition of one's connection to one's history, both personally and racially.

## **Blues Aesthetic**

### **POETICS OF THE QUOTIDIAN**

In Wilson's theater, informed by the tenants of blues philosophy, sound (musical or non musical) is appropriated to the project of identity affirmation. His aesthetic asserts new ideas about Blackness through his dramaturgical approach to musical and spoken sound, and his attempt to "capture in theatrical form music's expressive force." (H. J. Elam, *The Past as Present* 30) Even its mediated version positions sound, all sound, as representative of larger cultural and metaphysical forces that encompass the universe.

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<sup>96</sup> *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* has the most explicit quest to find the personal song, but *The Piano Lesson* contains its own example. Berniece has refused to play the piano for years, but when she is pushed to the brink and does play her own song, one very distinct from all other musical moments, it has the power to banish the undead, and purge the baggage she has been carrying since her husband's murder.

Through the blues, Wilson understands how the piano supports this world view, but also how the sound of the pick axe, of the barking yellow dog, of trains, of screams and shouts, and of “the way Blacks talk” help to tell a story of Black America. Moreover, the lyrics of Blues music tend to be first person and centered on personal anecdotes. But through hyperbole, and sometime outright lies, they elevate the personal to the mytho-poetic.

First he posits the blues as more than a musical form; rather they represent as philosophical system and a “vehicle through which Black people interact.” Blues erupt across the canon of his work. Importantly, the establishment of his Blues Poetic through dramatic structure and the organic presence of Black music in his plays further opens the door to other sound based epistemologies. The West African oral traditions that birthed the blues, as well as a privileging of richly tilled Black language characterize Wilson’s work. Wilson’s subordination of plot, Aristotle’s chief dramatic principle, for diction and melos, strikes at the “radical re-ordering of western cultural aesthetics” suggested by Larry Neal in his Black Arts manifesto. Wilson not only puts blues music in his plays, as a way to and explores blues themes in his story lines; he also approaches his plays as a manifestation of African orature, and writes dialogue with his ear tuned to the “everyday” African American speech. What Elam calls a “blues voice,”<sup>97</sup> straddles the literary conception of voice as individuating style, and the voice of performance, “the sounds, inflections, the accent of the lines.” (H. J. Elam, *The Past as Present* 30-32) It is simultaneously a philosophical stance and a performative one.

As a result, Wilson writes through a philosophy of the blues by using the “vernacular dialogue” he heard as a young man sitting in the corner at Pope’s restaurant and Pat’s Cigar Store in the Pittsburg Hill District. In interview after interview, August Wilson is always explicit on the fact that the blues inspired his work. He is equally clear about how he found an important means in hearing “the way Black people talk.” John

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<sup>97</sup> (H. J. Elam 32)



Lahr observes:

Years before, Wilson, who then "couldn't write dialogue," had asked Rob Penny, "How do you make characters talk?" Penny answered, "You don't. You listen to them." Now, in 1979, when Wilson sat down to write "Jitney," a play set at the taxi stand that had been one of Wilson's hangouts on the Hill, the penny, as it were, dropped. For the first time, he was able to listen to his characters and let them speak. "I found that exhilarating," he says. "It felt like this was what I'd been looking for, something that was mine, that would enable me to say anything." For Wilson, the revelation was that "language describes the idea of the one who speaks; so if I'm speaking the oppressor's language I'm in essence speaking his ideas, too. This is why I think Blacks speak their own language, because they have to find another way." While writing "Jitney," he proved to himself that he didn't have to reconstitute Black life; he just had to capture it." (23)

The attempt to "just capture" Black life speaks to the influence of Romare Bearden on Wilson's aesthetic. Wilson saw Bearden as the ideal model for the Black artist. In Wilson's estimation, Bearden successfully elevated everyday subjects— "a world populated by conjure women, trains, guitar players, birds, masked figures, and the rituals of baptisms, funerals, dinners, parades," to mytho-poetic stature. (Rocha 11) Bearden's series *The Prevalence of Ritual*, for instance, provided Wilson with another model, a complement to his blues approach, for bearing witness to the richness of Black Americans' daily existence:

What I saw was Black life presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence ... I was looking at myself in ways I hadn't thought of before and have never ceased to think of since. (A. Wilson, Foreward)

Wilson works to capture the poetics of the quotidian through his approach to the spoken language of his characters. Comparable to Stephen Henderson's suggested investigative approach to Black poetry, Wilson's transcription of the everyday sound of Black people as dialogue critically links "ordinary" African-American English to Black

“artistic discourse,” reframing AAE as a poetic form.<sup>98</sup> (46) Similarly, in his essay “Blues Poetics,” Paul Carter Harrison argues that Wilson’s use of the vernacular grounds his plays in a “*particularity of experience that is universally illuminating*,” elevating the quotidian as a vehicle for philosophical thought:

Wilson's appreciation of the blues' transcendental significance is facilitated by personal intimacy with the rhythms and repetitions that characterize ordinary Black speech, which invests the narrative with a heightened quality of poetry and song. (Harrison, August Wilson's Blues Poetics 316)

First, it is useful to explore the ways Wilson captures the quotidian, although there remains little space between his transcription of sound from Black speech in real life and his subsequent poeticization of that sound. Still, by entering the text naturalistically, I hope to highlight the ways the everyday and the sublime coalesce in the performance of Wilson’s work. To that end I will pursue three phonetic characteristics associated with AAE, final consonant reduction, level patterns, and diphthongization of medial rhotic sounds. These sounds often provide the tell tale segmental and super segmental signs of AAE’s presence in a linguistic environment. They are also frequently pressed into service during the imitation of AAE. As such their use by Wilson’s actors open up a discussion concerning what is real AAE, what is affected AAE, and to what extent these questions frame the larger concerns of Blackness and authenticity.

### **Devoiced Final Consonants**

The phonemic schemes of the actors in *The Piano Lesson* align with several segmental characteristics found in African American English. First, the habit of devoicing final consonants imbues the actors with a sound commonly observed in Black

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<sup>98</sup> Henderson argues that Black poetry must be read or performed to achieve its full meaning, because meaning is produced through the delivery and reception of the text. (46) Houston Baker adds that discussions of Black “texts” “must be based on sound historical notions of BEV” in order to fully unravel this “graphemic” record. (104) Through this critical process, ordinary African American speech becomes an indispensable critical tool in African American artistic discourse.

speech. Since the nineteenth century, final consonant devoicing has been an easily executable marker of Black speech. Accordingly, the characteristic can quickly devolve into caricature rather than naturalistically echo Black speech. In addition, the reduction presents an interesting dilemma for actors. On the one hand, traditional actor training involves a healthy regimen of voice and diction training. The prevailing philosophies seek to eradicate regionalism and naturalize a neutral dialect. In America, that baseline dialect is General American.<sup>99</sup>

The clear crisp articulation of final consonants is regarded as key to clarity in stage speech. Indeed, the absence of the final consonant can nullify perfect diction in the rest of the word. Final plosives are a particular point of stress. Quick action verbs often end with the voiceless cognates [k, t, p] and when they are lacking, speech can suffer from “overlapping” or “interconnected speech.” Without the “gate” provided by final plosives the vowel sounds of words in the course of a sentence or line bleed into one another. Lyle Mayer in *Fundamentals of Voice and Articulation* writes:

Speech sounds are rarely given their full value in overlapping or interconnected speech. One sound modifies and colors its neighboring sounds in a word. Sounds are strongly influenced by their "environment." The process is also known as assimilation or co-articulation. Assimilation helps to make sounds and sound combinations easier to pronounce, because it facilitates the various movements of the articulators. Assimilation, because it telescopes sounds, reduces the travel time between sounds, increasing the speed and overall efficiency of articulation. Your speech organs take the easiest route through a group of

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<sup>99</sup> Standard American English is perceived to be most "neutral" and free of regionalisms. Linguists often consider its speakers as “accentless”, though the vast majority of Americans do not use it. It is commonly identified with the Midwest (Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas) though this geographic origin does not withstand scrutiny. A variety of accents coexist within the United States, and for most people, SAE is neither native nor natural. Nevertheless, it is advantageous for actors to master SAE, primarily because the process involved in its analysis constitute the same phonetic principles that may later be applied to dialects and accents one will occur as an actor. SAE is also the accent taught to individuals from other countries learning English as a second language or to anyone who wishes to learn 'American English'. Voice and diction programs often focus on correct consonant articulation and vowel shaping. For an authoritative source on SAE in diction training for actors see Edith Skinner's *Speak with Distinction: The Classic Skinner Method to Speech on the Stage*. (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1990)

words. (67)

The result can be a lack of clarity for the listener, magnified in live production by poor acoustics, scenery, and even the bodies of the audience members itself. “What did you do” can become “Whujado.” What is more, speech and voice teachers may characterize the omission of final plosives as a lazy speech habit, or even a sign of ignorance.

In the execution of AAE, however, final consonant reduction and devoicing remain key characteristics.<sup>100</sup> Actors are trained to “pop” final consonants with absolute clarity in order to help carry and confirm words for the audience. So it is no small dilemma, that in order to be authentic, one must sacrifice one of the important tools of diction. How does one sound authentic as character, yet remain comprehensible as performer.<sup>101</sup>

In *The Piano Lesson*, the African American cast executes devoiced final sound in consonant clusters with varying degrees of success. Charles Dutton’s performance as Boy Willie is telling. At times, Dutton drops final consonants, at other moments he executes them. For example, in a ploy to get Berniece to give up the coveted heirloom piano, Boy Willie tries to convince his niece Maretha to give up playing the piano and to take up the guitar. General American would have the actor pronounce the word “guitar” as GIH-TAR’ /gi.tar’/ with a clearly rhotic or “r” sounding end. AAE, however, would suggest a pronunciation as /gi<sup>l</sup>.ta:/ or even /gɪ<sup>l</sup>.ta:/.<sup>102</sup> Dutton opts for the latter AAE

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<sup>100</sup> Lisa Green defines consonant cluster reduction as “a process in which the final consonant group or cluster composed of two consonant sounds is reduced to a single consonant sound” as in the execution of kin [kain] for “kind.” (107) Green defines devoicing consonant sounds, as “making a voiced consonant voiceless” at the ends of words as in the execution of [kæp] for “cab,” or [pɪk] for “pig.” (116)

<sup>101</sup> In some cases, for instance Brad Pitt’s Pikey dialect in the film *Snatched*, incomprehensibility becomes a comic character trait. Similarly, blackface minstrelsy and minstrelsy-inspired caricatures eschew comprehensibility for comic effect.

<sup>102</sup> (00:16:47-53 )

pronunciation. In another moment, Doaker speaks the line, “If you let him tell it, he a big recording star,” but does not pronounce the final /ɹ/ in “star.”<sup>103</sup> With stage speech, the final r omission does not disrupt clarity in the way the omission of final plosives (b, d, t, p, k, g) may.<sup>104</sup> Perhaps this is why Dutton and Gordon, along with others in the cast feel comfortable consistently omitting final r sounds.<sup>105</sup>

But re-listening to the production, I continue to find moments where final plosives are reduced: *Berniece* “I ain’t waking that child up.”<sup>106</sup> Neither the /t/ in “ain’t” nor the /d/ in “child” is executed. *Doaker*: “He got mad and left,” neither of the /t/ sounds nor the /d/ are sounded.<sup>107</sup> *Boy Willie*: “You never find you another piano like that,” the /k/, /d/, and /t/ are omitted along with the /ɹ/ in “never” and “another.” The actors do deviate from the omission of final consonants at times. For example, when Boy Willie introduces Lymon to the piano for the first time, Dutton does pronounce the final /t/ sounds in the lines “you see how it got all them carvings on it. That’s what I was talking about.”<sup>108</sup>

Wining Boy’s (Lou Myers) letter reading is another place where the treatment of final consonants is used by an actor to lend a sense of verisimilitude to speech. Code switching is a hallmark of Black vocal sound. It involves shifting pronunciations in speech depending on the social situation. With African American speakers of AAE, code

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<sup>103</sup> (00:08:22)

<sup>104</sup> Received Pronunciation and non-AAE dialects from the U.S. Northeast and South regularly omit final “r.”

<sup>105</sup> To be sure, as a mediated performance, actors also have the advantage of microphones and even automated dialog replacement. Still the goal is to get it on the take, particularly since ADR, even with sophisticated software, is painstaking, to say the least. These final consonants become even more critical in stage work where a careful blend of nasality and final consonants (both of which diminish in AAE) are primary carries of vocal sound to the back row.

<sup>106</sup> (00:07:55)

<sup>107</sup> (00:08:13)

<sup>108</sup> (00:08:33)

switching is particularly common when a non-Black listener is involved. Yet it is also evident in instances of formal utterance even in the presence of Black listeners. Anyone who has ever heard a church mother reading before the congregation can recognize the shift in diction in moments of formal utterance. It is a shift toward what is often called “proper<sup>109</sup>” speech, marked by a self-consciousness about final consonants and an adjustment in syllabic emphasis.

Lou Myer’s portrayal of Wining Boy provides a great example of this shift. Having just returned from Kansas City, Wining Boy sits in the backyard sipping a drink as his brother Doaker tends a vegetable patch. As they converse, Myers as Wining Boy displays familiar grammatical and phonemic markers of AAE. For example, just prior to reading the letter, Wining Boy declares, “Broke, what you mean broke. I got a whole pocket full of money. You wait till he come in here. I’m gone tell him about hisself.”<sup>110</sup> Wining boy then announces that his 1<sup>st</sup> wife Cleotha has died, and then reads a letter of remorse sent to him by her friend, Ms Willa Dean Perta.<sup>111</sup> In the course of the letter, Myers reveals the tendency in AAE to code switch for formalized or written utterance, specifically to reinforce final consonant clusters, particularly those with –ing endings. Whereas traditional AAE would dictate a shift from –in to –ing, Myers presses the –ing ending in phrases such as “And am writing as a friendd of Cleotha’s” or “In the loving

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<sup>109</sup> Lisa Green addresses this distinction often made by speakers of AAE, the difference between talking “normal,” and individuals who speak (or situations wherein speech is adjusted toward the idea of ) a Standard American accent. In formal occasions it may not carry the same social stigma as when used conversationally, or when it is judged to be one’s habitual idiolect. As “being proper” and “sounding White” may display identical phonetic characteristics in some linguistic environments, the social implications of the sound often depend on context as a metric for its valuation.

<sup>110</sup> (00:21:54)

<sup>111</sup> The name was changed for the teleplay. In the original script the woman’s name is “Willa Bryant.” I mention this here because I am unclear of the spelling of the name. Myers pronounces it [pɜrə], and by the rules of AAE may be spelled “Perta,” “Purda,” or “Perter”

arms of her sister.”<sup>112</sup> He also executes the characteristic syllabic punctuation that often accompanies this in-group formal code shift. Thus Alberta becomes /al.'ber.'ta.ʔ/ in which each syllable receives an equal stress value. The contrast is noticeable because Myers remained true to the rules of AAE only moments early as he joked with his brother about the piano, Berniece, and Avery. With his first line upon finishing the letter, “Man that hit me so! They was nailing that coffin shut by the time I got the letter,” Myers reestablishes a conversational phonemic scheme. It is important to note that both the letter reading’s formalized diction and the conversational tone prior to and following the letter represent different facets of AAE. As I will argue later, demonstrating such attention to detail helps the production to authenticate what Elam calls Wilson’s w(righting) of history.

What does this kind of deviation mean? From an acting perspective, in some cases, the performers seem to be playing with diction choices in order to pursue action objectives. For instance, when Boy Willie lays out his plan to buy the Sutter plantation, he makes the final plosives in his lines exceedingly crisp: “Ah Doaker. I walkk in there. Tipp my hatt lay my money down on the table. Gett my deedd. And walkk on outt.”<sup>113</sup> His pace is slow and measured; his body is tense with anticipation over achieving his life’s goal (his super objective, in acting terms.) Woodard seems to break the rules as well with the line, “And you need to do it quick!”<sup>114</sup> She not only pronounces, but accentuates the final unvoiced plosive in “quick” to emphasis the declarative.

These small inconsistencies, however, do not disqualify diction patterns used in the performance as non-African American English. The qualities described by linguists refer to very general trends and commonly observed characteristics. Individuals who self identify as African American English speakers reveal a diversity of phonic schemes,

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<sup>112</sup> (00:22:55-00:23:38)

<sup>113</sup> (00:09:31-44)

<sup>114</sup> 00:07:47

idiolects that deviate from the general rules of the language, and subject to regional and class based variations. Furthermore, there are far more instances where speech does conform to recognized features of AAE. Deviations may stem from internal choices or from an actor's ear tuned to a specific model carrying the deviation in question. But overall the performances present AAE through such features as (including but not limited) rhotic omissions, final consonant omissions, devoiced consonants, and reduced consonant clusters.

### **Level patterns**

Wilson and company also rely on the rhythm and modulations of speech used by some African Americans to create realistic portrayals of the everyday rituals of Black life. Some of the distinctiveness of 'sounding Black' involves the falling and rising pitch patterns. These include vocalized, non verbal events that African Americans recognize as their own such as Carl Gordon's unscripted negative "um, um, um," as he listens to Maretha struggle at her piano lesson. There are also verbal events within *The Piano Lesson* which I hear as Black simply because of the pitch contour used by a particular actor. Two back to back instances present themselves when Berniece returns home to find Wining Boy in the parlor sitting at the piano. As Woodard comes around the corner she hollers out, "I know that ain't Wining Boy sitting there."<sup>115</sup> Why does the way Woodard say the line sound Black to me? To begin, Wilson has written the line in accordance with the rules of African American English grammar. (Ain't *is* a word, and an important one in the AAE lexicon.) More interestingly, the fairly level intonation Woodard uses across the phrase—an inflection that goes up at "*know*," and does not drop until "*there--*" recalls a 1990 study of the intonational contours of AAE speakers

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<sup>115</sup> (00:45:12-16)



conducted by Lisa Green.<sup>116</sup> Green found that some African American English speakers produced neither a rising nor falling pattern in yes-no questions where speakers of Standard English end the same kind of questions with a final rise in intonation. Green observes:

Level patterns refer to the change (lack of change) in pitch levels known as intonational contours. While there is an infinite variety of pattern combinations, linguists recognize the trend in standard English is for declarative statement trend toward falling tones, and questions trend toward rising tones at the end of the sentence. Studies by Green, Foreman, and Tarone, however suggest that AAE often uses level or falling tones in questions, especially in yes-no environments. What we take from this finding is a recognition that level pattern in questions may be a “salient property” in characterizing speech and sounding Black but also in how listeners “form opinions about the speech of AAE speakers.” (130)

Woodard’s line is not a clear yes-no question. Still, to my ear, a similar level tone across several segments (here both syllables and words) distinguish Woodard’s delivery as “sounding Black.” Her dactylic stress pattern<sup>117</sup> compounds the level patterning in Woodard’s delivery, pushing her sound further from a standard of English grounded in the “pentametric model.” She pushes on, shouting with joy at the sight of her uncle, “you all had this planned!”<sup>118</sup> Again, the pitch contour lifts at “had” but does not drop until the end of the sentence and the actor equalizes her stress pattern across the last three syllables. In this way, stress patterns, pronunciation and tone of the voice simultaneously serve as the notes of the playwright’s musical composition while also outlining the boundaries of a specific cultural history.

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<sup>116</sup> See also Christina G. Foreman, “Identification of African-American English dialect from prosodic cues.” *SALSA VII: Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Symposium About Language and Society* (Austin TX: Texas Linguistic Forum 43 1999) 57-66.

<sup>117</sup> A stress pattern of long stress followed by two short syllables.

<sup>118</sup> (00:45:17)

### Diphthongization of Medial Rhotic Sounds

Another interesting diction technique that the actors in *Piano Lesson* use is the diphthongization of medial vowel sounds that precede rhotic coloration. At times the /ɪ/ sound in certain words is transformed into an un-rhotic two vowel sound. It is most noticeable when the characters say “BERNEICE.” What in standard American sounds like [bə.nis], as in the words “burn” and “niece”, becomes [boi.nis], as in the words “boy” and “niece”. The sound does not occur only with her name. For instance, Berniece executes it while arguing with Boy Willie and the other men in the room about the true cost of the piano:

I look at you and you are all the same. You Papa Boy Charles Wining Boy Doaker, Crawley [her deceased husband]... you’re all alike. All this thieving and killing and thieving and killing. And what it ever lead to? More killing and more thieving. I ain’t never seen it come to nothing. People getting **burnt** up! People getting shot! People falling down their wells! It don’t never stop! (00:49:10-42)

Woodard pronounces burnt as [boɪnt], or “boy-nt.” Similarly, both Woodard and Dutton pronounce Pittsburg with the same diphthongization of the second vowel to produce a near Brookly-nese sound with /pɪts.bəɪgh/. R-vocalization varies among most English dialects. British North country, Standard British, New England, New York, and Southern accents are often “r-less.” This particular vowel shift, however, is significant in the discussion of authenticity and Black sound. The change is, in fact, a regionalism commonly heard in Louisiana, Mississippi & Alabama African American dialects, particularly among older speakers. I grew up hearing “toin” (/toɪn/) and “choich”/tʃoɪtʃ/ as pronunciations for turn and church. It is a common pronunciation found on Delta blues records as well, and perhaps why it erupts in Credence Clearwater Revivals attempt at “Proud Mary” on the lyric “Big wheel keep on “toynin”/proud Mary keep on boynin.” In each case, it is a clear choice and an attempt to authenticate character through dialect choice. Ironically, while Richards and Wilson use it to establish

authentic Southern accents, as a regionally specific trait within AAE, its use contributes to the counter-monolithicization of Black identity. In other words, at closer examination, as there are ways to sound Black in performance, there is no one way of sounding Black in the United States.

Still, the presence of AAE in Wilson's plays creates a reciprocal process of legitimization between the production and Black speech writ larger. By adhering to the general rules of AAE and writing how some Black people really sound, Wilson and his players ground the play in the bedrock of naturalism and plausibility. His work not only has "something to say about us," it says it *like us*. The presence of AAE in a serious drama, where "people are talking about something real" reinforces the notion that the people who speak this way, the Black working class, are not ignorant, one dimensional figures of comic relief. It is an inverse to Marion Cook's early 20<sup>th</sup> century suspensions of dialect to validate scene of Black romance, though the intent to substantiate Black lives on stage appears similar. Part of Wilson's project throughout the cycle is to highlight the extraordinary at work in the commonplace. Furthermore, its use in a serious dramatic form represents Wilson's political agenda of legitimating Black cultural mechanisms. The use of colloquial Black speech establishes a measure of realism as backdrop for Wilson's play with the supernatural. His investment in the oral tradition vis-a-vis Black speech allows for a reconsideration of American history through a blues poetic. Once a convention of historicity is established, Wilson can embellish and color colloquial speech, strengthen its lines, heighten its highlights and shadows, make it bolder and larger for the stage. Using black Speech as profile for the poeticization of that speech, Wilson styles a ritualistic language. Where Kennedy and Baraka fashion ritualistic chants, Wilson begins with the conversational tones stowed in his memory while growing up in the Hill district. He clips lines, inserts faint rhymes, ("People getting burnt up. People getting **shot**/People falling down their wells. It don't ever stop.") and otherwise embellishes them until delicate, understated, crafty musicality emerges.

In this, Harry Elam hears Wilson "(w)righting history" through his plays,

connecting spirituality and “ritualizing time,” rearranging time, stretching time, replaying time. Elam points to a moment in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* as an example, when Harold Loomis’s vision and recounting of “bones walking on top of the water,” the souls of those lost in the Middle Passage— while standing in the common room of a boarding house in 1910s Pittsburgh. Doaker’s solo on the history of the piano serves a similar function in *The Piano Lesson*, as does Berniece playing on the piano at the end to defeat the ghost of Sutter. In these moments, Elam holds, Wilson brings the past into the present, in essence, folds time, and the centers the narrative of American history on working class African American lives, lives so often “erased, avoided, or ignored” by formal histories of the United States. (3-4)

#### SCRIPTING THE INEFFABLE

*The Piano Lesson*, in performance, works on two different levels. To borrow from a description of the visual elements found in Kabuki, Wilson’s language functions as a stylized naturalism.<sup>119</sup> That is, Wilson’s language simultaneously sounds like real life, but also resonates in a more luxurious state of formalized beauty. Distinct from the purportedly objective (i.e. Ibsen), yet not a nakedly subjective approach to utterance (i.e. Dada), “stylized naturalism” attempts to heighten objective “reality”, so as to make its “Reality” theatrically vivid. Wilson’s language fits the idea of taking what is as slice-of-life as you can get, and sweetening it with stylizations. His language sounds very natural, easy, and authentic; unfortunately no one in real life always sounds as beautiful as his characters do. What is more, this balance between style and “real-ness” is least evident on the page. But Wilson’s stylized naturalism becomes strikingly apparent in performance.

A great example in the Hallmark production occurs just after Lymon (Courtney B.

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<sup>119</sup> Kumadori, the exaggerated make designs found in Kabuki are an example. The designs rely on the natural highlight and shadows of the face (cheekbones, cheek hollow, brow, nose bridge, etc). But lines are enlarged, and shadows and highlights are accentuated with high color contrasts.

Vance) and Boy Willie (Charles Dutton) describe the murder of Berniece's (Alfre Woodard) late husband Crawley:

**BERNIECE:** All I know is Crawley would still be alive if you hadn't come up there and got him. My husband is dead and in the ground, and you still walking around here eating. That's all I know. He went off to load some wood with you and he ain't never come back. (A. Wilson, TPL 52)<sup>120</sup>

It is a brilliant blues stroke to attach "...and you still walking around here eating," at the end of the line. From a purely sonic perspective, Woodard's delivery is spot on, using a characteristically Black southern cadence, eliding the initial "and" to only a verb and slight nasal semivowel, plateauing her inflection between "you" and "still," and stabbing through the remainder of the sentence before Dutton's Boy Willie can respond. In fact, were it not for this careful idiomatic execution, the line might sound comically. To be sure, there is a hint of playfulness about the line as it is written, and in this regard, it works as a blues moment— simultaneously tragic and comic. It is also an example of the kinds of double descriptives Hurston describes in "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1933), like "high-tall" or "Hot-boiling." While such redundancies may seem out of place within the grammatical rules of Standard English, as seen here, they exceed standard strictures, and instead, attain a poetic stature revealing truths more profound than lexical equivalencies might dictate.

Ironically, Wilson dramatizes this moment of pain through a restraint of the language. Berniece has years of emotional baggage that she could unload in this moment. But in this space, in this break, after the fashion of Fred Moten, Wilson plays his bluest chord— the longstanding insight afforded by the philosophy undergirding Black sound practices that there are things that cannot be articulated in conventional language. This is an important interpretive scheme for Black art, and one I would like to

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<sup>120</sup> (A. Wilson, TPLHallmark 00:51:10) These signatures (hh:mm:ss) index the time counter for the Hallmark Hall of Fame DVD release version 1998DVD1370 USA/2898DVD1370Canada. -

briefly connect to the work of historian Saidiya Hartman.

Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth Century* (1997) provides a nuanced perspective on the meaning of voice and song as it emerges from slavery to signify Blackness in sound.<sup>121</sup> She critiques the way that nineteenth century observers of slavery (and contemporary students of the era) engage "the spectacular character of black suffering." (3) Her investigation explores a range of sites of subjection, from the coffin to holiday jubilations, minstrelsy, and melodrama. Among these sites, the songs of the enslaved, what DuBois dubbed the Songs of Sorrow, provide a constructive paradigm concerning the recognition of Black humanity. Hartman's contention concerns the opacity of slave songs; that is, accounts which interpret an apparent incoherency or incongruence of voice and song during scenes of Black subjection. But Hartman argues in defense of a continued elusiveness of "meaning," and of the enslaved's right to what Sandra Richards and Paul Gilroy identify as an "unsayable claims to truth."<sup>122</sup> (Hartman 35) Departing from observers who read slave songs either as proof of contentment, or cathartic response, or dirge of

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<sup>121</sup> Hartman's investigation rests on the premise that slavery not only dehumanized people, but that its practitioners also relied on the humanity of the enslaved to fully enact the "the forms of violence and domination" which characterized the peculiar institution of slavery and the aftermath of racial oppression. As Hartman writes, "the barbarism of slavery did not express itself singularly in the constitution of the slave as object but also in the forms of subjectivity and circumscribed humanity imputed to the enslaved." (6)

<sup>122</sup> Hartman challenges the notion of objective distance, suggesting instead that those witnessing the enslaved and the acts which sustained the institution, whether first hand or through historical record, project themselves onto the spectacle, and thereby undermine the agency and individuality of the subject through a self-interested interpretation of individual scenes of subjection. As a result, categories such as sorrow and joy, or terror and entertainment collapse into one another. Forcing the enslaved to sing and dance, or brutalizing them with torture and forced labor were all for the benefit of the onlooker. Moreover, the interpretation of the responses of the enslaved to these dehumanizing acts—the traveler's journals describing New Year's celebrations, Abraham Lincoln's reflections on slave songs, the WPA transcription of slave narratives by the grandchildren of slave owners—re-inscribe the "transparency" and "hypervisibility" of the enslaved, conditions which, Hartman argues, rests at the center of domination and oppression. In trying to articulate the "meaning" of black suffering, the onlooker often reduces the complexity of what the enslaved might have been experiencing, and repositions the suffering of the enslaved as universal, thereby granting him/herself access to the experience. As such, black bodies remain vicarious beasts of burden, carrying the suffering of humanity so that others need not. By interpreting, and representing "the sheer unrepresentability of terror," witness and historical student alike simply become "voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance?" (3)

hopelessness, Hartman rejects interpretations that seek to clarify slave songs for the sake of the witness. Such an approach might suggest that the apparent contradiction of song under the duress of physical labor evinces a biological or cultural incapacity for suffering. Such an approach insinuates a capacity for the enslaved African to endure the horrors of slavery. Such an approach implies that the seeming “incoherency” of songs at the auction block were in some way without intellectual calculation. Rather, she finds it far too simplistic to establish a specific coded meaning to the songs of the enslaved as it also undercuts the agency of these slaves. Hartman writes:

Hence my task is neither to unearth the definitive meaning of song or dance nor to read song as an expression of black character as was common among nineteenth century ethnographers but to give full weight to the opacity of these texts wrought by toil, terror, and sorrow and composed under the whip and in fleeting moments of reprieve. Rather than consider black song as an index or mirror of the slave condition, this examination emphasizes the significance of opacity as precisely that which enables something in excess of the orchestrated amusements of the enslaved and which similarly troubles distinctions between joy and sorrow and toil and leisure. For this opacity, the subterranean and veiled character of slave song must be considered in relation to the dominative imposition of transparency and the degrading hypervisibility of the enslaved, and therefore, by the same token, such concealment should be considered a form of resistance... The right to obscurity must be respected, for the “accumulated hurt,” the “rasping whispers deep in the throat,” the wild notes, and the screams lodged deep within confound simple expression and, likewise, withstand the prevailing ascriptions of black enjoyment. (36)

For Hartman, song provides a much more nuanced response to subjection, “neither an embrace of slavery nor a unity of feeling” but instead “a veiled articulation of the extreme and paradoxical conditions of slavery, often mistaken for nonsense or joy.” (35) Here an apparent incoherence may represent the best and often the only true expression for inarticulable grief, or of subjection that exceeds the capacity of language to describe. Thus Hartman hears the slave songs, not simply as a catharsis, but as a form of resistance to the “imposition of transparency.”

The blues inherit this principle of the unsayable, and Wilson seems to understand the interplay of grief and the seemingly nonsensical through his hearing of the blues. He in-scripts it through Berniece's use of a double descriptive: "dead and in the ground," "still walking around here eating." Berniece declares the undeniability of Crawley's death and of his absence: *you can talk about what happened on that day, but the truth is he is gone, and I can point to a number of different things that attest to that fact.* With fewer words, and without disrupting the emotional flow of the scene, Woodard's delivery of Wilson's lines indexes blues meditations about the inarticulable layers of grief and hardship. The moment tells a familiar story (A Black man has been murdered in the pursuit of economic "get-ahead," and a Black woman bearing a burden of grief because of it) as Wilson and Woodard unleash Black speech into a much larger matrix of cultural meanings.

### **The Web of Black Sound: Musical and Sermonic Presences**

The central artifact in *The Piano Lesson* is a musical instrument, consecrated by blood, whose story embraces the sojourn of African America. Oral history, African metaphysics, and community coalesce in the parlor of the Charles home to wring meaning from the everyday existence of its inhabitants.<sup>123</sup> While the music of the piano

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<sup>123</sup> For a discussion of the evolution of blues music see Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American literature: a Vernacular Theory*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 1-14; Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1963); Samuel Chappell, *The Bluesmen* (New York: Oak Publications, 1967); David Evans, "African Elements in Twentieth-Century United States Black Folk Music," (in *Report of the 12th Congress, London, American Musicological Society*, 1981) 57-62; Michael Haralambos, *Right On: From Blues to Soul in Black America* (New York: Drake, 1975), 76-82; Charles Kelt, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 50-68; Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 217-24; Albert Murray, *The Blue Devils of Nada: A Contemporary American Approach to Aesthetic Statement*. (New York: Vintage International, 1997); Richard J. Powell, *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism*. (Washington: Washington Project for the Arts) 18-36; Barry Lee Pearson, *Robert Johnson: Lost And Found* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, c2003); Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopations: African Retentions in the Blues* (New York: Stein and Day. 1970) 36-66; Patricia R. Schroeder, *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture*. (Urbana: University of



figures prominently in the story of *The Piano Lesson*, the voices telling its story are equally important. Voices remains intertwined with the structural, thematic, and subject matter of blues music; and blues music, its field holler predecessor, and sacred gospel cousin represent an American incarnation of African oral genres. More than twelve bars of musical notes, the blues represent a “meditational site,” space where forms collide and synthesize new meanings.<sup>124</sup>

The space, constantly synthesizing the experience of the New World, provides an important soundscape for the study of inter-textual sound. Daniel Morales discusses the presence of music in the work of Continental, Caribbean, and Afro-American drama. He frames his discussion with two distinct modes of interdependent music and dramatic text. First, he identifies the structuring of dramatic works in parallel with musical forms. Second, he describes the “organic use of music in a dramatic production” in which music functions as more than a “musical interlude to create atmosphere.” At key moments, music may erupt within the suspended world of the play and fuel the dramatic action (Morales 150) With *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson and Richards rely on both modes of

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Illinois Press, 2004) 192; Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Down home Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977) 3-15; Olly Wilson “The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African American Music,” (*Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', and Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*. Ed. Gena Dangel Caponi. Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 1999) 157-16; and Elijah Wald, (*Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*. New York: Amistad, 2004.)

<sup>124</sup> Wilson called the blues a philosophical system which contained the Black “response” to the conditions of the new world. African American literary critics also approach the blues as a critical tool for examining texts, be they written or performed. Houston Baker’s vernacular theory goes so far as to suggests that the blues comes from a much longer, ever adapting oral tradition which has been sustaining the “social and cultural history” of African peoples for centuries. In Baker’s estimation, the blues represent a “meditational site,” and a much larger project of psychological negotiation and historiographic observations:

The blues are a synthesis (albeit one always synthesizing rather than one already hypostatized). Combining work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more, they constitute an amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America — always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World.” (Baker 5)

musical presence to enrich the vocal soundscape, but two instances—the opening road trip scene (“No Sugar in My Coffee”) and the “Berta Berta” interlude—resonate with the theory of Black sonicity and exemplify the thematic impact an organic musical presence can carry. In addition, Wilson also circulates the oral traditions of the Black pulpit amid the sonic currents of AAE and the blues. Rev. Avery’s revelatory monologue provides yet another sonic identifier for Wilson’s recuperation of African American daily life.

### **“NO SUGAR IN MY COFFEE”**

After the initial title sequence, and following a brief rag on the piano by Sutter’s ghost, we cut to a sequence of Lymon and Boy Willie on a road trip from Sunflower, MS to Pittsburgh. They are in the front of an old flatbed truck. The bed is filled with watermelons destined for sale in Pittsburgh. As they drive, they sing. Boy Willie initiates each verse, and then joins Lymon in each response:<sup>125</sup>

BOY WILLIE: I don’t want ...

BOTH: ... no sugar in my coffee, it makes me mean, lord, it makes me mean.

BOY WILLIE: I don’t want

BOTH: ... no sugar in my coffee, it makes me mean, lord, it makes me mean.

BOY WILLIE I got a bull dog

BOTH: ...he weigh five hundred in my back yard, lord, in my back yard.

BOY WILLIE I got a bull dog

BOTH: ...he weigh five hundred in my back yard, lord, in my back yard.

BOY WILLIE: When he bark

BOTH: ...he roll like thunder up in the clouds, lord, up in the clouds

BOY WILLIE: When he bark

BOTH: ...he roll like thunder up in the clouds, lord, up in the clouds

The singing stops abruptly as Lymon’s brakes begin to fail. The song is a classic call and response form of the field holler, the form from which the blues is thought to

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<sup>125</sup> (00:00:27-00:01:10)

have evolved. Importantly, these songs are not accompanied by instrumentation. They are, instead, purely vocal instances performed by the actors. The lack of accompaniment is especially interesting in this mediated version of the play. In fact, the original stage script does not contain this sequence at all, nor does the song appear elsewhere in the play script. I point this out because it represents an important production choice to include the new material, and to keep it without instrumentation. It is particularly telling given that the moments just before and the moments after it are accompanied. As Lymon's brakes fail, a line of harmonica and acoustic guitar descend to underline their comically harrowing brakeless skid around a bend in the road, melons smashing against the pavement. Musically, we then return to the opening rag<sup>126</sup> this time played by Maretha as a part of her piano lessons. After a brief exchange between Maretha and Berniece, then a quick one between Doaker and Berniece, we return to the road trip and hear Boy Willie and Lymon in another cycling exchange:<sup>127</sup>

LYMON: Who wrote the lie?  
BOY WILLIE: Who wrote the lie?  
LYMON: On the hen house door  
BOY WILLIE: I don't know  
LYMON: Who wrote the lie?  
BOY WILLIE: Who wrote the lie?  
LYMON: On the hen house door  
BOY WILLIE: On the hen house door  
LYMON: Who wrote the lie?  
BOY WILLIE: Somebody tell me  
LYMON: Who wrote the lie?  
BOY WILLIE: I don't know

This song is brief, but falls within the same pre-blues category as the first. Nevertheless, it is significant that Richards and Wilson introduce an example of the blues-rendered-vocally during this opening sequence. At the outset of the production,

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<sup>126</sup> An original composition by Dwight Douglas Andrews

<sup>127</sup> (00:03:37-00:03:47)-00:00:27-

Wilson and Richards foreground the roots of the blues and of the people in the drama through sound. Moreover, they establish the aesthetic benchmark for the entire production through a distinctly African American vocal form.

**“BERTA, BERTA”<sup>128</sup>**

The most moving moment of Black vocality in the production comes with the men’s rendition of the classic blues, “Berta, Berta.” The lyrics to this chain gang work song call out to a woman, Alberta, as though she is a life line to their sanity, fending off moral collapse. Boy Willie and Lymon have just returned from terrorizing Avery at his job at the Gulf Building. Doaker and his brother Wining Boy are sitting in the kitchen at the table. Boy Willie informs Wining Boy that Sutter has fallen down his well, another victim of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. Wining Boy then tells the story of how he invoked those ghosts at the crossroad and “had a stroke of luck that run on for three years.”<sup>129</sup> (35) Importantly, the brief storytelling of the supernatural moment establishes an “orature-mood”<sup>130</sup> for the rest of the scene.

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<sup>128</sup> (00:26:50-00:34:40)

<sup>129</sup> (00:29:50)

<sup>130</sup> In an essay for the September 2007 issue of *Performance Research* entitled “Notes Towards a Performance Theory of Orature” Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o offers a brief genealogy of the term orature, from its origination by the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu to its potential as an aesthetic theory. Ngũgĩ writes:

The term orature has been used variously since the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu coined it in the early seventies of the last century to counter the tendency to see the arts communicated orally and received aurally as an inferior or a lower rung in the linear development of literature. He was rejecting the term oral literature. But he never lived long enough to develop the concept; his life was untimely cut short by the brutal Idi Amin dictatorship, whose agents poisoned him in Nigeria during the famous Festac’77. Idi Amin hated critical performing artists, and Pio Zirimu was one in a list of his victims. But his brief definition of orature as the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression remains tantalizingly out there, pointing to an oral system of aesthetics that did not need validity from the literary. The term however has spread, and one reads variously of Hawaiian Orature, Namibian Orature, Ghanaian Orature and many others. Despite the widespread usage, very few have engaged with the term to tease out the various theoretical possibilities in the term. Pitika Ntuli of South Africa is one of the few who have attempted to take the term beyond its Zirimian usage. (Ngũgĩ Wa)

The conversation then turns to Parchman Farms, the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman, where each of the men sitting at the table had spent time. Lymon is the most recently survivor from Parchman after having been arrested for “not working,” and sentenced to Parchman to pay off his \$100 fine. The real life Parchman was essentially a forced labor camp where petty or invented charges landed Black folk in jail.<sup>131</sup> The penitentiary owned over 16000 acres of Delta farmland and, by state mandate, was required to be financially independent of state funds. As a result, the warden and prison administrators forced inmates to grow cash crops and livestock.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, the prison used a trusty system by which inmates were hierarchically assigned to supervise one another. In all it was a brutal situation not far removed from slavery itself. In this scene, the men transition from light hearted banter, into an episode of emotional recall of the trauma experienced at Parchman, and a temporary catharsis through communal song.

Boy Willie begins the song as he teases Lymon for his recent incarceration, saying, “They had Lymon down there singing Berta, Berta.” The others laugh, as Lymon

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Joseph Roach in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996) and Diana Taylor in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003) each examine the positioning of orature as a physical transmission of memory and history as distinct from written history as an abstract, intellectual means of expression across time. Vera Lynn Nobles cites Abu S. Abarry’s “Mpai: Libation Oratory” to describe African-American orature as “ranging from the spirituals, the blues and the work songs to the sermons, proverbs and the telling of tales.” (Nobles 94) For other sources addressing the category of orature see Karimu Welsh Asante, *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the Traditions*. (Westport: Praeger, 1994); Richard Bauman. *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Literature*. (Cambridge; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1986); Robert Elliot Fox’s *Masters Of The Drum: Black Lit/Oratures Across The Continuum* (Westport : Greenwood Press, 1995); Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy: The Technology of the Word*. (New York : Routledge, 2002); and Jan Vansina’s *Oral Tradition. A Study in Historical Methodology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973).

<sup>131</sup> There were 12 male camps and one female camp at the prison. (Taylor 43)

<sup>132</sup> Through interviews of Black inmates written in dialect, William Banks Taylor’s *Down on Parchman Farm: The Great Prison in the Mississippi Delta* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999) provides a general history of the prison and the institution of convict lease in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Taylor’s is one of the few histories of Parchman which does not focus on the prison’s influence on Delta Blues. The Mississippi Archives also maintains a collection of photographs from the early twentieth century, documenting the institution from 1914 to the early 1940s. (MDAH)

protests, “No they didn’t, how you gone tell that lie, Boy Willie? I ain’t never been in no Parchman penitentiary” But Doaker and Wining Boy laugh. They recognize the song as a rite of passage into an exclusive group of men. Then Boy Willie begins to sing, slowly at first:<sup>133</sup>

He say, he say:  
O Lord  
Berta, Berta

Wining Boy joins him in a harmony.  
O Lord gal well ah  
Go head and marry don’t you

The image shifts to Lymon. He has just proclaimed that he “ain’t never been” to the penitentiary, but he reaches for his glass, bows his head and closes his eyes. The song is creeping into his susceptible interior, and stirring something in him. There is also a brief jump to Doaker, who looks similarly disturbed by the sound creeping into his ear.

Wait on me oh ah  
Go head and marry don’t you

The frame cuts back to Lymon, eyes closed now, and head down fingering his shot glass. He joins the song quietly as if singing to himself.

Wait on me oh I  
Might not want you when I

We see Doaker again, his eyes turned down, his browed furrowed, and his thumbs rubbing together. It seems he is also thrown back, recognizing the song. But he resists joining the chorus of voices.

I go free oh I  
Might not want you when I

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<sup>133</sup> (00:30:52-00:33:27)

The camera pans out to a medium shot, and we can see the four men at the table. Boy Willie and Wining Boy have begun lightly stomping their feet to the rhythm. Wining Boy's eyes are now closed as he sways left to right under the transporting spell of the song.

I go free well now  
Um, um, um

The song is like floodwater catching people up as it swells the banks of what was playful conversation. Doaker continues to resist, as if fending off the memory of the place until called out by Boy Willie, "Come on, Doaker. Doaker know this one."

O Lord gal well ah

Doaker joins in on the next bar.

O Lord, Alberta, Berta  
O Lord gal well ah

Having a quorum of voice, Wining Boy intensifies the song, shouting, "Raise em up!" In response, Boy Willie raises his imaginary pick axe, and swings it heavily in rhythm landing it with a now heavy stomp of his foot on "Drop." Suddenly the song takes on a new energy.

Raise em up higher let em  
Drop on down oh ah  
Raise em up higher let em  
Drop on down well now

The song hits its stride, and each man stomps heavily on the floor. The image rotates through close ups of each man's face, each face pulled together and distant-eyed. The site of their trauma is finally named and their reverie intensifies once more as they call its name.

I'm on old Parchman, got to work or leave oh-ah  
I'm on old Parchman, got to work or leave well

The four men, eyes still closed in deep recollection, ride the wave of song higher and higher. They add percussion, slamming the table and stomping their feet like shovels and hoes into the soil. Lymon clinks his shot glass against the whiskey bottle, a percussive accentuation, perhaps recreating some sound from the prison plantation.

O Alberta, Berta, O Lord gal oh-ah  
O Alberta, Berta, O Lord gal well

Boy Willie swings his arm wildly in triple time. Wining Boy tops the voices with powerful tenor sweeps.

When you marry, don't marry no farming man oh-ah  
Every day Monday, hoe handle in your hand oh-ah  
When you, marry, marry a railroad man, well  
Every day Sunday, dollar in your hand oh-ah

Boy Willie emerges first, and with an intense look in his face, taps Wining Boy and Lymon, calling the song off. The men stop singing, all except Doaker who left, as if stranded on a roof top following the flood, singing the refrain by himself.

O Alberta, Berta, O Lord gal oh-ah  
O Alberta, Berta, O Lord gal well

He opens his eyes and realizes he is the last one singing. They all laugh at the trick and in a blink resolve the tragic hardship of Parchman memories with fellowship and jocularity. Through sharing this vocal expression, they have at least for the moment, purged it and found solace in their present community. For Wilson, this is a paradigm for the Black oral tradition bound up in blues and its satellites. It indicates the permeability of the borders between music, orature, and vocality under the umbrella of Black sonicity. In the scene, a unique vocal sound erupts from a moment of Black orality, and the resulting unaccompanied voices carry elements found in the conceptual framework of Black musical traditions—communal music-making, group sentiment, responsorial style



of choral singing, corporeality, percussivity, unaccompanied music, and the recreation of quotidian sound. The resulting sound can be regarded as Black sound by the proximity of its content and form to other forms within the bounds of African American expression.

Moreover, the moment speaks to the issue of “authenticity” through the index of gender in important ways. A familiar trope within the blues, these four men affirm their connections to one another through the invocation of a disembodied Black woman. Just as song possessed the power to banish Sutter’s ghost, it also makes salvation, realized as Alberta, palpably present. Importantly, Alberta is physically not present, and her absence-yet-presence gestures toward an important qualifier within the discourse of authenticity. By joining in the song, in this vocal exercise, (or exorcise), each of the men at the table “authenticates” himself through a shared identity that is specifically Black, heterosexual, and male. To not sing is to deny one’s authenticity in any one of those sites, and risk exclusion from the community under construction in this moment. This is not to say that any character not identifying through those three site cannot sing the song. But the evocation of Alberta (who is not there) infers a very specific nexus of identity. Wilson and company undermine the notion of a totalizing authenticity for Black folks, while simultaneously re-creating a ritual of authentication. That it occurs through voice buttresses the argument that sound remains a valuable filter for exploring Blackness and, as Gilroy notes, the construction of “self-identity, political culture, and grounded aesthetics.” (Gilroy 127)

[INSERT GENDER HERE]

#### **“WHO SHALL I SEND?”**

“No Sugar in My Coffee” and “Berta, Berta” erupt organically to reinforce dialogue and the visual narrative. Other moments in *The Piano Lesson* index African American rhetorical traditions to the same end. Wilson is heavily influenced by the theater of the 1960s. Theatrically, the Black Arts movement sought a ritual based aesthetic, often indexing the Black church as a model for its expressive practices. Paul

Carter Harrison theorized that this ritual-based aesthetic flowed out of a tradition older than the Black church, locating the original impulse in Bantu philosophical concepts of "Kuntu," (cosmic connection) and "Nommo," (power spoken word power.) As described by Oliver Jackson, theater possesses a potentiality for the sacred when centered on kinetic (through dance) and sonic (spoken and musical) principles of invocation, rather than on plot, character, or theme. (xii)

While dance is not central to Wilson's dramaturgy (though the juba, hand clapping, and circles make more than the occasional appearance in his plays), sound (in the form of outright song or storytelling) are ever-present and regularly override plot and character. As Donald Morales notes, "Anyone familiar with Wilson's plays understands that each major character, during the course of the play, will perform a solo/monologue that modulates on the Blues/theme." (148)

Wilson's is a project of reciprocity. He writes using models drawn from Black musical and rhetorical practices which, in turn, validate these oral modes through their instantiating on stage and on screen. With "No Sugar in My Coffee" and "Berta, Berta," the production indexes the vocal center of the blues tradition. Another way Wilson indexes Black oral tradition through the voice lies in his folding of Black worship conventions into the stream of his dialogue. In *The Piano Lesson*, this falls to the character of Avery (Tommy Hollis). One of his monologues in particular rests on Black preaching traditions, not only in how it is written, but in Hollis's delivery of the text in performance.

Also a part of the migration north from rural Mississippi, Avery has found a niche as a preacher in Pittsburg. Avery visits the Charles home late in the morning on the day Boy Willie and Lymon arrival. He has come over to pick up Berniece on his way to the bank. He intends to ask for a loan to finance the expansion of his new Church, the "The Good Shepherd Church of God in Christ." He knows Boy Willie and Lymon from Mississippi, though it was a life before he was saved and before he was called. Upon hearing that he is now a preacher, Boy Willie and Lymon joking discount his conversion.

But Doaker urges Avery to describe the moment of his calling, the dream of the three hobos:

Well. . . I was sitting out in this railroad yard just watching the trains go by. The train stopped and these three hobos got off. Told me to come go along with them. They give me a candle, told me to light it, but to make sure it didn't go out. Then they took me to this place that was filled with all kinds of different people. Only they all had sheep heads and was making noise like sheep make. And then they showed me these three doors and told me to pick one. Well I went through one of them doors and that flame leapt off that candle and it seemed like my whole head caught fire. I looks around and there was four or five other fellows standing there and then we heard a voice tell us to look out across this valley. We looked out and we seen the valley was full of wolves. The voice told us that these sheep people over to the other side of this valley and somebody had to take them. And Then I heard another voice say, "Who shall I send?" Next thing I knew I said, "Here I am. Send me." And That's when I met Jesus. He say, "If you go, I'll go with you." Something told me to say, "Come on. Let's go." That's when I woke up. I knew right then that I had been filled with the Holy Ghost. Called to be a servant of the Lord.<sup>134</sup> (A. Wilson, TPL 24-25)

An important part of Black southern religious belief is an understanding that preachers are not created solely through ecumenical educations, but are also called to the cloth, not infrequently through dreams and visions. Of the seven preachers (whose names are not included in the publication) surveyed for William Pipes' study of Black preaching, six of the seven report having been "called."<sup>135</sup> While it is described in a

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<sup>134</sup> (00:18:32-00:19:53)

<sup>135</sup> For example, "I was called by God to preach the Gospel in my early childhood." (Pipes 17); Called to "save souls"; (Pipes 22) "Received a "divine call" (Pipes 31); "Called of the spirit to preach." (Pipes 37); "Felt the spirit in me; kept worrying me; wouldn't give me no rest. Spirit had to get out." (Pipes 39); One pastor, as a testimonial, includes his own calling in the sermon. This is equally interesting as Pipes has chosen to transcribe the sermon using dialect spellings. Despite its jarring presence, the transcription reveals how central dialect was as an emblem of scholastic authenticity:

I remember when I was called to preach. Dere wuz one crowd preachin' Ha didn't rise and dere wuz annuder crowd preachin' dat He did rise. . . . Er, my belove', but one day, my belove', [In stride now.] I come jest to readin' in de Bible whar it said. . . . [Coherence and words lost in the rhythm and audience response.] And I got worried

variety of ways, each represent a divine sanctioning, required by congregations and certified by church elders, prior to mounting the pulpit. As Gerald L. Davis notes:

... the notion of the "call," the concept that one has been "chosen" by God to pursue a career in the ministry. Even though the ministry as a profession in which ministers are trained formally in universities is increasingly commonplace in African-American churches, ministers and preachers do frequently serve an apprenticeship under the stewardship of older pastors. Most conventional African-American churches require a preacher to show evidence that he has been "called" to preach. The "call" can be identified in any number of ways: through conversion; through a "sign," which may be interpreted by the church elders; through evidence of healing powers; by verification that a male was born with a cowl or veil over his head. It is generally acknowledged that the nature of a "call" is mysterious and requires special talents for verification. (68)

Avery immediately establishes his "legitimacy" as a man of the cloth with the blessings of the elder in Doaker. By the end of the play, however, he is ineffectual, unable to drive the ghost from the Charles home, and unable to win the hand of Berniece. Wilson comments here on the position of Christianity in African American cultural history, suggesting that the legacy of African spiritualism resides in places besides the cloth of the Church. Still, in this early scene Avery establishes a command of language and verbal presence that bring Black homiletics into the production's soundscape. Wilson is able to recall the Black preaching tradition through the quality of Hollis's delivery. To better understand the qualities Hollis and Wilson bring to bear, let me first introduce some of the research into black preaching that may be relevant.

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again. I was like the folks comin' from. ... I said, "Now, whut is God?" I said, "Now, one man said to me, 'You got ter work out yer soul's salvation' and I hear annuder preacher sayin', 'Now, it's by grace, it's by grace, not accordin' to yer work, but accordin' to His own version, the grace given us in Christ Jesus.' " And I sit right there. I come 'st doin' like Job. Jest like . . . [we] folks will do. I sit on my little "do nothin' " and wait on time. [Laughter.] . . . Got me a three-legged stool and I sot right down, my belov', until God, my belov', visit me one night. And He come to me one night, my belov', I seed a bright light, my belov'. Lit the whole room up. I seed a light shinin' all 'round me, belove'. A little man speak ter me agin and led me ter de church. . . . "Preach de Gospel; . . . great faith in God—Christ, preachin' de Word of God." (Pipes 44)

Avery locates Black sound through diction and prosody; he also invokes a homiletic structure reminiscent of categories outlined by Henry Mitchell's 1970 treatise *Black Preaching* on Black preaching. Those structural components include "introduction (personal identification with preacher)," "imaginative retelling of the Bible story," and "a celebrative climax." As well as reoccurring stylistic characteristics like "Linguistic flexibility," "cadence," "call," and "response."<sup>136</sup> (162-177) William H. Pipes' investigation, referenced previously, is a record and analysis of seven "old-time" sermons collected just after World War II in Macon County, GA. Pipes lists dialect, "change of pace for effect," and "other scattered stylistic devices," as reoccurring qualities, but these vagaries offer little as metrics for analysis. Cleophus LaRue's *The Heart of Black Preaching* (2000) argues a uniquely Black approach to scripture and identifies an attending homiletic field commonly used by African American preachers. LaRue remains focused on thematic rather than stylistic identifiers. L. Susan Bond in her analysis of African American preaching praises LaRue's analysis for "going beyond stylistic concerns and into the heart of theological themes" and "considering diversity within some general contours." Bond also takes an analytical approach which seeks to expand the borders of "African American homiletic theories," and "demystify the notion of a monolithic tradition." (17-18) Yet while broadening the range of styles, both LaRue and Bond contend that there exists a range of practices commonly resounded in the Black pulpit.

African American folklorist Gerald L. Davis examines the performed African-

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<sup>136</sup> See also the work of Lyndrey Nyles, "Rhetorical Characteristics of Traditional Black Preaching," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Thousand Oaks: Sage Press, Sep., 1984) 41-52 (an extension of the principles presented by Mitchell); Olin Moyd, *Redemption in Black theology* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979) (narration and repetition); and James Harris Preaching liberation (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), ("Jesus as liberator"); for additional qualities observed in African American homiletic practices.

*American Sermon in I Got the Word in me and I can sing it, you know* (1985).<sup>137</sup> In his study, Davis follows three preachers from the Bay area (King Louis H. Narciss, DD. Mt Zion Spiritual Temple Oakland, CA; Rev. Dr. Carl J. Anderson St John's Missionary Baptist Church, Oakland, CA; and Bishop E. E. Cleveland, Ephesians Church of God in Christ Berkeley, CA.) Davis recorded, transcribed, and examined sermons by these ministers during the spring of 1969. Among the approaches Davis uses to analyze the sermons in his study are metric scansion and a formulaic analysis tool. The unit formula dissects the transcribed text of each sermon, and delineates metrically irregular units, each centered on a core idea. Davis defines his African American sermonic unit as follows:

a group of hemistich phrases shaped into an irrhythmic unit when spoken to express an aspect of a central theme. The irregularity of the sermonic line is made rhythmic, not uniformly rhythmical, through the techniques of melisma, dramatic pause, emphatic repetition, and a host of devices commonly associated with African-American music. The most important characteristic of the formula, however, is not the irrhythmic line. The most important characteristics of the African-American sermonic formula are the groups of irrhythmic lines shaped around a core idea. Metrical consistency is not an essential feature of the African-American sermon, although an apparent and deliberately measured affective oratorical style is required. (77)

Each unit contains tension between “secular and sacred polarities,” (for example, narratives, anecdotes, or relatable experiences juxtaposed Biblical verse) and this tension propels the argument of the sermon and the energy of its delivery.<sup>138</sup> He acknowledges that his is a “rough and very approximate notation system,” but Davis conceives a

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<sup>137</sup> See also *The Performed Word* (1982), a film by Gerald Davis that includes interviews and sermons by Bishop Cleveland. At the writing of this project, the video is freely available at <http://www.folkstreams.net/film,194>.

<sup>138</sup> To my reading, Davis' conception of sermonic units resembles acting beats. Davis coincidentally was a speech and drama major at Fisk University. It is not surprising then that he applies his knowledge of performance technique, the actor's work, to analyze folklore, oral history, and homiletic technique.

valuable instrument for the Black Performance Studies toolbox. With these metrics, scholars can compare and contrast sermonic (or other) material for thematic diversity as well as stylistic continuities. His decision to delineate units according to thematic tension counters prevailing attempts to force African American homiletic study into disciplinary crates housing other oral forms. He is able to counter claims by folklorist like Albert B. Lord, Bruce A. Rosenberg, and Daniel Crowley, for instance, who position the Black preaching as only a folk narrator with little control over form, or without a line of reasoning to argue. Listening to Hollis' performance through the ear-horn Davis and other homiletic theorists provide, enhanced my understanding of the performance itself, and of the elements that stand out as the most "authentic" sounding parts of the sermon tradition. In other words, what elements does Hollis try to recreate in order sell the performance?

Hollis begins subtly. He first finds the formula while talking to Lymon, Boy Willie and Doaker in the kitchen around the dinner table. He finds ways to drop subject pronouns to stagger his rhythms, and find thematic parallels, as with "**Told** me to come go along with them," or "**Called** to be a servant of the Lord." His tale is also stocked with references to threes as indicated by three hobos, and three doors. Similarly, he uncovers theme of threes, an "irrhymic" scheme that does not read on the page, as Davis suggests, but one Hollis establishes vocally in performance. Take for instance his description of first meeting the hobos coming from the train:

Well. . . I was sitting out in this railroad yard just watching the trains go by.  
The train stopped and these three hobos got off. Told me to come go along  
with them. They give me a candle, told me to light it, but to make sure it  
didn't go out.

Hollis places clear phrasing markers between "candle" and "told" and between "it" and "but," resulting in "They give me a candle/told me to light it/but to make sure it didn't go out." They are not shifts in beats in the sense that new objectives arises. They are, instead, moments of quick inhalation, though they do not sound like deep draws for

power and stamina. Rather they sound like stylistic phrasing breaks reminiscent of a pastor early in a sermon.

The stress patterns in Avery's first few lines also show some hints to this trimetric phrasing<sup>139</sup>. Listening for Hollis' phrasing, I have divided this initial beat into three tri-sectional phrases:

***“Well. . . /I was sitting out in this railroad yard just /watching the trains go by.”***

Syllables per Phrase: 1. 10. 7

Stress Pattern: u .u/uuuu//u./uu/uu

***“The train stopped/and these three hobos got off/Told me to come go along with them.”***<sup>140</sup>

Syllables per Phrase: 3. 7. 9

Stress Pattern: u//.uu//uu./uu/uuu/u

***“They give me a candle/told me to light it/but to make sure it didn't go out.”***

Syllables per Phrase: 6. 5. 9

Stress Pattern: u/uu/u./uu/u.uuu/uuuu

The first is eighteen syllables, the next twenty syllables, and the last is twenty one. In each, Hollis begins with unstressed syllables, demarcates two breathing creases, clusters the stresses toward the center of the line, and finishes each line quickly, and sparsely stressing the end of the delivery. Elsewhere, the stress patterns Hollis uses as in the even stress across the words “sheep heads” and a parallel rhythmic gesture in “sheep make,” reflects what Green and Tarone observed regarding the distinctiveness of level patterns and intonational contours in African American English. Hollis lifts his inflection on “three doors,<sup>141</sup>” stretches the vowel sound of “side,<sup>142</sup>” and ratchets his pitch and volume up on

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<sup>139</sup> Davis counters that the rhythms of sermons in his study tended to be irregular. I find an overall irrhymicality, yet to my ear there seem to be smaller, quickly executed bundles of rhythms in Hollis' delivery.

<sup>140</sup> Allowing for the unuttered syllable, (not uncommon in the scansion of iambic pentameter )

<sup>141</sup> The full phrase reads, “And then they showed me these three doors and told me to pick one.” (A. Wilson, TPL 25)



the first two words of “And Then I heard another voice say.” These examples do not quantitatively establish the parameters of intonational difference between AAE Standard American English. They are however, common to African American ecclesiastic oration; their performative deployment here certainly recognizes that connection, and seeks to authenticate and tie the production to real life Black cultural modes.

Delving deeper into prosody, the clearest reference to the Black preaching tradition occurs when Avery “sings” the line “look out across this valley.” Commonly preachers use the sung line within a sermon to vocally underline points of importance as well as a means of breaking up the monotony of speech. Many times it functions similarly to topping in music, for example when in the “Berta, Berta” song, wining Boy takes his tenor over the other voices. Sometimes a preacher just “gets happy,” and manifests the ‘filling with the holy spirit as a vocal surge in intensity, pitch and volume. Of these moments, Mitchell writes:

The Black climax, at its best, is a kind of celebration of the goodness of God and the standing of Black people in his kingdom, as these elements have been expressed in the message. In order to accomplish this, the Black preacher has shifted from objective fact to subjective testimony—from “he said” and “it happened” to “I feel” and “I believe.” While middle-class white preachers are admonished to avoid what Henry Sloan Coffin called “ecclesiastical nudism” in the pulpit, Black preachers, in climax, lay bare their souls in symbolic and contagiously free affirmation. The achievement of complete liberty in the spirit affirms the preacher’s personhood in a positive, healing catharsis. But his assertion of self in the form of unlimited praise of God is a form of fulfillment in which it benefits both vicariously and directly.” (188-89)

Avery’s monologue is not a formal sermon. Aside from the obvious given circumstances of the scene, it lacks the structure and duration of a traditional Black protestant service sermon. Still I find it intriguing that with so little time and space

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<sup>142</sup> The full phrase reads, “The voice told us that these sheep people over to the other side of this valley and somebody had to take them.” (A. Wilson, TPL 25)

Wilson, Hollis and Lloyd Richards conjure the Black church into the theatrical space. The speech is imagistically stirring, reinforcing the immediate presence of the supernatural in the lives of these characters. It dovetails with earlier blues inclusions through its description of hobos and box cars, and through sonic textures of singing preachers and language circling in threes.

The musical and homiletic eruptions in the Piano Lesson echo principles articulated in Olly Wilson's discussion of Black music traditions. His theorizing of a heterogeneous sound ideal finds Black music frequently intensifying musical expression by injecting non-singing voices into performance. *The Piano Lesson* inverts this trope to intensifying dramatic, spoken expression through organic musical interventions. This cross migration of sonic forms becomes even more complex with the addition of non-dramatic, yet non musical, homiletic vocality located in Avery's recitation concerning his dream. Yet despite a diversity of sonic forms, these practical elements interlock seamlessly, in no part due to the talents of Wilson, Richards, Woodard, Myers, Dutton, Gordon, Vance, and Hollis. But the sonic forms represented in *The Piano Lesson*— blues, African American English, and Black preaching— also mesh because they all sprout from the same historical font. Having been grown in the same garden<sup>143</sup>, it is no surprise that these expressive tropes specific to African American culture go as well together as okra, corn, and tomato.

### **The Way Black People Speak**

African American literary scholar Shelly Eversley considers racial authenticity through language using Frantz Fanon's description of the "Negro and Language" paradox, positing language as a social exchange and matrix of power. Eversley predicates her

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<sup>143</sup> As Paul Gilroy observes, it is a common soil "facilitated by a common fund of urban experiences, by the effect of similar but by no means identical forms of racial segregation as well as by the memory of slavery, a legacy of Africanisms, and a stock of religious experiences" (116)

argument on Fanon's observation, that "to grasp the morphology or syntax of any language 'means above all to assume a culture'" and to "possesses the world expressed and implied by that language." Interpreting Fanon, Eversley imagines the consequences for the African American creative intellectual. She writes:

...the African American creative intellectual... theoretically has possession of the world she inhabits, the world that her language implies... That power would grant her the authority to name, to give meaning to things and ideas within her world... But, before she can claim the power her mastery of language affords, the social world her language implies would have to acknowledge that she has possession. Thus the paradox: if no one acknowledges her art as her mastery of language, she will not possess the world she inhabits, the world that her language implies. She will be dispossessed.<sup>144</sup> (xi)

Eversley goes on to argue that "racial authenticity makes such a dispossession possible" because the social world the subject's language implies demands that she meet an impossible standard of authenticity before it acknowledges her right to possess the world she inhabits. Eversley grounds these hypotheticals by examining the how Dunbar's success (his "acknowledged mastery") stemmed from his fulfillment of turn of the century criterion regarding Black authenticity through dialect poetry; by examining Hurston's success as an interpreter of authentic, "impenetrable" folk realities; through an examination of Gwendolyn Brook's portraits of interiorized racial identity and the authenticity of feeling race; and through a look at the masculine "jargon of authenticity" during the Black Art Movement and its reification in the poetry of Nikki Giovanni. Eversley reflects on how artistry smothers beneath the burden of authenticity. Art should be the product of imagination not the ontological masquerade necessitated by standards of authenticity.

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<sup>144</sup> Wilson makes a strikingly similar observation to that of Fanon, noting that "*language describes the idea of the one who speaks; so if I'm speaking the oppressor's language I'm in essence speaking his ideas, too. This is why I think Black's speak their own language, because they have to find another way.*" He also finds that Black oral traditions have been dispossessed. (Lahr 9)

The “authentic” Black speech in his plays is, at closer examination, the sound Wilson grew up hearing in mid century Pittsburgh. To say that what Wilson heard growing up is what all Black people sound like can be read as an “essentialist” idea. Black performance theory, armed with historical precedent, warns against erecting fences of authenticity around Blackness as they can become towers of exclusion. But as a theater-maker, his focus on the ordinary means that Wilson’s dialogue attempts to convey in a realistic manner, the way Black people speak in order to generate the “illusion of reality” often sought by realistic art. This illusion greases the wheels of the suspension of disbelief and helps the audience immerse itself into the world of the show. With period dramas in particular, where the historical milieu exists as a significant factor shaping character interaction, a verisimilitudinal approach allows spectators to flesh out the theatrical framework with historical knowledge.

But I would argue that Wilson’s translations of “the way Blacks speak” do avoid essentialist notions about Black people. To begin, the historicity present in the work seems to counter an essentialist conception of Black life. Wilson couches his plays in very specific historical settings. He does connect multiple threads from Black cultural history, but doggedly ties them to each play’s present setting.<sup>145</sup> And he speaks of Blackness as a shared history and a legacy of cultural practices (dietary, linguistic, spiritual, and musical) from which many Black Americans draw their sense of identity, not of a Blackness that is a set of innate biological characteristics or a psychological imperative. Thus, to return to Fanon and Eversley, Wilson’s reliance on actual Black sound represents an effort to acknowledge the authority of AAE speakers—bluesmen and women, preachers, and congregations—to name the world they inhabit. Couching Wilson’s use of AAE in discourses of authenticity must recognize these parameters and Wilson’s dramaturgical purposes. As Elam notes, “The complex relations of history, racial identity, and identification at play in Wilson’s representation and reception.

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<sup>145</sup> The music, for instance, is accurately dated in each of his cycle plays.

Wilson through his own style of realism, his three dimensional portraits, his storytelling bravado, validates a history of black experience.” (H. J. Elam, *The Past as Present* xviii)

Moreover, *The Piano Lesson* only makes an approach toward historical realism through sound, costume, and scenic design. Certainly one of Wilson’s aims, like his inspiration Romare Bearden, is to capture Black life. But for Wilson and Richards, this approach is a taxiing down the runway prior to poetic lift-off. This production (in fact all of Wilson’s Pittsburgh Cycle pieces) departs from realism even as it fastens its stylistic scaffolding to life-like foundations. Among the four B’s influencing Wilson, Mark Rocha includes the work of Borges and his gift for magical realism. As Elam notes, Wilson does not write history so much as he (w)rights it. Again, Elam observes

Wilson (w)rights history through performative rites that pull the action out of time or even ritualize time in order to change the power and potentialities of the now. This process of history necessarily critiques how history is constituted and what history means. It reinterprets how history operates in relation to race and space, time and memory. The parentheses around the w also imply a silence and contingency; (w)righting can sometimes mean righting. Wilson seeks to "right" and remake American history by recuperating African American narratives that have been erased, avoided, or ignored. He focuses on the daily lives of ordinary black people within particular historical circumstances. (H. J. Elam, *The Past as Present* 3-4)

In his pivotal *The Ground on Which I Stand* address for the Theatre Communications Group conference in 1996, playwright August Wilson articulated his purpose as a playwright, proclaiming “The second tradition” in a legacy of Black art begun with our arrival in the New World. He describes the first tradition as one reflected in “art that is conceived and designed to entertain white society.” The second tradition represents the legacy, beginning in the slave cabins, of creating work that “feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of Black America by designing its strategies for survival and prosperity.” (Wilson 18) For Wilson, the ten play Pittsburgh cycle is an intentionally political project. While Wilson was quick to eschew the “didactic or polemical” approach common to Black Arts playwrights, he nevertheless maintained his intent to

create art concerned with Black cultural identity. Echoing DuBois, the New Negro impulse, and his Black Arts predecessors, Wilson threw in with the struggle to self-determine through art, and to reconstruct the image/echo of Black Americans.

For Wilson, the solid and sure identity of Blacks in America resides in the notion that Black people in the Americas are Africans. Black American culture remains immersed in African philosophies and African expressive modes. Music and voice, “the recuperation, the recognition, the reaffirmation of song,” provide the means by which Black folk can realign themselves in the quest for spiritual health and political progress. (H. J. Elam, *The Past as Present* 18)

Wilson’s connects of history, cultural forms, quotidian practices, spiritualisms, and political conditions to name the inherited grounds on which he stands. If the discourse of authenticity can apply to works such as *The Piano Lesson*, it is a strategic essentialism establishing solid ground— a source of security, community, and connection to something larger than self-- for those who would identify. The Black experience is not narrow, nor is it monolithic. But there is an historical reality of binding experiences, and responses to those experiences that have forged Black consciousnesses. Wilson recognizes sound as one important vehicle through which people have shared the “psychic response to the dislocations [shared] in American history,” and deploys it masterfully across the span of his work.

## **CHAPTER 5, THE KALEIDOPHONE: SONIC MISCEGENATION AND VOICE IN *FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO***

Over four decades have passed since Adrienne Kennedy began confounding audiences with her enigmatic portraits of psychological distress. Since that time, critics have struggled to situate Kennedy among the thematic concerns that her work touches. Like Artaud, Kennedy seems drawn to the mystical, to the autobiographical, and to protagonists embroiled in the dangerous psychic event of juggling identity. Across her work, she sees this event as the dissolution of one's own distinctiveness into multiple characters. Kennedy's staging of the interchangeable "*I*" often consigns linear plot and other conventions of realism to the theatrical backseat. Yet even in her most expressionistic portraits, Kennedy's characters externalize their conflicts of identity through a number of theatrically exciting ways. In examining the role of voice in her play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), I hope to better understand what I call Kennedy's Theatrics of Intermediacy—that is, her use of fluidity in language, characterization, scenic effects, and sonic environments to amplify a reoccurring thematic focus on “in-between-ness” in her discourse on identity.

### **Production History**

Adrienne Kennedy began writing a short story about a troubled young woman and the owls that kept her company in 1960 during a trip abroad with her husband Joseph Kennedy.<sup>146</sup> The couple visited Ghana and Nigeria, and spent several months in Rome prior to their return to the United States. By the time they returned to New York, Kennedy had finished the first draft of *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. She enrolled in Edward

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<sup>146</sup> Interestingly Joseph Kennedy was an early biographer of Frantz Fanon. A telling clue given the way Kennedy addresses the psychological effects of racial formation and her theatrical play with hair, masks, and complexion.

Albee's Playwrights' Workshop in 1962, and saw a workshop staging of the play in 1963 at Circle in the Square, featuring Diana Sands and Yaphet Kotto. Albee himself produced the first professional production the next year at the East End Theater. The play, directed by Michael Kahn, opened on January 14, 1964. It starred Billie Allen as the Negro Sarah, and Cynthia Belgrave as Queen Victoria, with Ellen Holly as the Duchess of Hapsburg, Gus Williams as Patrice Lumumba, and Norman Bush as Jesus. *Funnyhouse* garnered a Distinguished Play Obie in the 1963-64 season, the same year LeRoy Jones won the award for Best American Play.<sup>147</sup>

The production that I am examining was a 2007 collaborative effort between Austin Community College (ACC) and The ProArts Collective in Austin, TX. The show was the first in an annual joint production between the two organizations which funds the Boyd Vance Scholarship for African American students in Dance and Drama at ACC. I directed the cast which featured Feliz Dia McDonald as the Negro Sarah, Mikala Gibson as Queen Victoria, Nicole Delgiudice as the Duchess of Hapsburg, Leroy Beck as Patrice Lumumba, and LeVan Owens as Jesus. The production opened February 23, 2007 and closed March 4, 2007. The show fared well in the 2006-2007 Austin Critic's Table Awards receiving nominations for Best Production, Best Ensemble Performance, Best Lighting Design, Best Director, and Best Actor in a Leading Role, winning in the latter two categories. What is more, the production was conceived in conjunction with an academic panel organized by Austin Community College in partnership with ProArts and Humanities Texas. The panel, "Adrienne Kennedy and Autobiography on the American Stage: A Salon," explored Kennedy's work at the intersection of autobiography, identity,

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<sup>147</sup> Since the critical success of *Funnyhouse*, Kennedy has written over twenty plays, a memoir, a novella, and a host of short fiction and essays. She won Obies again: a Best New American Play award for *June and Jean in Concert* (2001), again for *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* (1996), and a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008. Kennedy also received two Rockefeller grants, a Guggenheim Award, The Lila Wallace Readers Digest Award, 1994 Academy Award in literature from The American Academy of Arts & Letters, and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards Lifetime Achievement Award (2003). Like Wilson, Kennedy was born in Pittsburgh, though her parents raised her in Cleveland, and sent her to The Ohio State University. In 2003, the University honored her with an Honorary Doctorate of Literature.



and performance, and provided an academic examination of an important, though seldom produced African American playwright.<sup>148</sup>

### THE PLAY

*Funnyhouse of a Negro* documents the last desperate moments of a young African American woman named Sarah. Sarah rents a brownstone apartment in the West Nineties in New York City from a White woman named Mrs. Conrad, and spends part of her time with her White boyfriend Raymond. The apartment is macabre, with dusty black curtains, low light, candles, and a giant alabaster bust of Queen Victoria set on cinder blocks and boards against one wall. There is no indication of a specific time period, but it seems contemporaneous with its scripting, that is, set in the early 1960's. The play is a surrealistic, repetitive series of monologues and scenes that recount Sarah's own conception, her mother's descent into madness, and Sarah's (Negro)-self loathing. Within the confines of her bedroom, Sarah lives in a nightmarish fantasy, cast with historical figures that alternately relieve and inflame her crisis of identity. Her self-image, twisted as if refracted through a funhouse mirror, draws her closer to death. In fighting against her darkness, Sarah wrestles with the ghosts of her heritage and the circumstances of her own conception. At the end of the play, Mrs. Conrad and Raymond find that Sarah has hung herself in the room among her statues and relics. They laugh at her corpse as the play closes.

When I first read this play as a college freshman in theater history class, I hated it. I was repulsed by the images of hair falling out. I thought of Drano commercials, clots of hair clogging the pipes, and of the owl pellets we had dissected during a trip to the nature park in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I thought of dreams wherein I lose my hair and all of my teeth. These were always dreams that seemed terribly real, where the suspension of disbelief was at its

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<sup>148</sup> The panel included Dr Omi Osun Joni L Jones, Sharon Bridgeforth, and Dr. Kimberly Benson.

most non-consensual. They were dreams that seemed, upon waking, larger than my own individual idiosyncrasies, Jungian in scope.<sup>149</sup> I did not dislike the play because it was flawed, but rather because I did not understand it, and because it stirred up uncomfortable things at the bottom of my personal pot.

### **Multiplicity as a Theme in *Funnyhouse of a Negro***

In approaching the work years later as a director, I found it still disturbed me. But with age, I also began to read it as a rich and layered drama ripe for playing. The work is dense; the work is complex and layered. In her reading of *Funnyhouse*, Linda Kintz notes how the carnivalesque mood hinted at through the title encourages a staging wherein “time is stopped, held open, while hierarchies are momentarily collapsed, rearranged, and challenged.” (150). At the same time, the play is also urgent. After all, *Funnyhouse* is, to play on the medieval dramatic form, a *mortality* play. Sarah’s crisis of identity is life threatening. While Kennedy’s play with time, repetition, and multiplicity held tremendous production possibilities, I also struggled with how to stage a dramatic action that was at once temporally and spatially complex. The script, for instance, moves seamlessly from a New York apartment, to a snowing ballroom, to a cabin in Georgia, to the jungle. At one moment Sarah is in the hallway with her father, in the next she sits alone months after his suicide.<sup>150</sup>

What seems clear is that Kennedy has discarded linear space and time in order to

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<sup>149</sup> Robert Scanlan reads *Funnyhouse* as a sort of staged Freudian dream: multiple associations, above an undercurrent of incestuous violence, hair loss and baldness as defloweration/castration anxiety, and the perpetual reappearance of a dead father. Its fluidity is not only dream-like, but nightmarish. (95) Cacophony rules in the *Funnyhouse*, from cruel laughter when a “bald head is dropped on a string or when Sarah is ridiculed by Raymond or Mrs. Conrad,” or “Sarah’s father’s incessant knocking.” Sarah’s mind-room is never “stable, reliable, truthful, or comforting.” Nor is it ever quiet. These sounds assault Sarah, and, as Phillip Kolin notes, they theatrically unsettle the audience beyond the fourth wall, and in Artaudian fashion, the “screams, cries, and jeering laughter destroy Sarah’s mind and the audience’s peace.” (36)

<sup>150</sup> The ultimate fate of Sarah’s father Wally is undetermined by play’s end. Conflicting accounts of his circumstances alternately suggest suicide, patricide, or that he is still living.

fold discrete moments from Sarah's life back onto one another. In so doing, each theatrical element comes to hold multiple histories. Beyond time and setting, the people who populate the play exhibit the most striking examples of this multiplicity. I took my first clue from the opening stage directions of *The Owl Answers*, *Funnyhouse*'s twin play, where Kennedy clearly describes the mutability to her characters:

[The characters] change slowly back and forth into and out of themselves, leaving some garment from their previous selves upon them always to remind us of the nature of She who is Clara Passmore who is the Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl's world. (Kennedy, OWL 29)

While *Owl* offers a more explicit stage direction, the characters in *Funnyhouse* carry a similar fluid quality. As products of Sarah's memory, their ontologies remain unfixed. At times, for instance, the Lumumba character seems to be the historical Patrice Lumumba. In other moments, he speaks as Sarah's father Wally. Still, at other moments, the text casts the same performer as a spectral incarnation of Blackness itself. Each figure experiences a similar ontological slipperiness, gliding between their historical namesakes and expressionistic projections of Sarah herself. Thus the play, as Deborah Thompson observes, is always "underwritten by multiple texts, myths, cultural icons, fictions, and (meta) narratives." (D. Thompson, Fiction 71)

Thus, the fluid quality of each character (and of time and memory) in *Funnyhouse* encompasses more than its historical references. Kennedy is a self-avowed autobiographer, and always links her own personal identifications to the broader cultural canon embedded in the text. She constructs characters concurrently linked to public and private meanings—ever an example how the personal is political for Kennedy. Lumumba was assassinated during Kennedys' visit to Ghana, and she was bombarded with his image on posters raised throughout Accra. She visited the Chapultepec Palace in Mexico City where the real Duchess of Hapsburg, Marie Charlotte Amelie, had been deposed. She bought postcards of the monarch and imagined the Duchess as a character in a yet unwritten play involving "an alien persona" and a "Negro writer." Kennedy was

fascinated by Bette Davis<sup>151</sup> and her portrayal of the Duchess in William Dieterle's 1939 film *Juarez*<sup>152</sup>. Queen Victoria seems inspired by the Kennedy's visit to London and the "dramatic, startling statue" of the real Victoria displayed in front of Buckingham Palace (Kennedy, *The People Who Led to My Plays* 118). Along with Sarah's early reference to Edith Sitwell, Queen Victoria's best known biographer, these touches perfume the work with autobiography.

More importantly, these instances point to Kennedy's habit of blending types, coincidentally precisely what edicts against miscegenation within the U.S. sought to prevent. In fact, Kennedy's dramaturgy is built on the dramatic tension and spectatorial unease generated by blending, be it genetic (in the case of biracial characters), theatrical (through a mix of dialogue, monologue, and tableaux) or dramaturgical (temporal shifts, repetitive changing-same text). At its core, Kennedy's work engages in a post-modern, "miscegenative" approach. In an interesting meta-harmonic way, she treats the mixing of racially marked bodies by using a principle of aesthetic blending.

Hence, Kennedy weaves layers through *Funnyhouse* (and across her work) in ways that invite a staging approach based on associative meaning and blending as key production principles. The dramatic action concerns a woman wrestling with her racial "in-between-ness." Characters shift in terms of who they represent. The text undulates between monologues, scenes, and tableaux. The stage directions blur physical boundaries through blinds, shifting walls, and rapid locations changes. Within this milieu of borderless-ness, vocal sound emerges as fertile ground for manifesting Kennedy's miscegenative approach. Just as Kennedy presents a visual *kaleidoscope* to reinforce the play's thematic concern with psycho-racial indeterminacy, a play of diction and vocal sound provides a productive, *kaleidophonic* means of externalizing the play's counter-

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<sup>151</sup> Kennedy once remarked, "As long as I can remember I've wanted to be Bette Davis. [pause] I still want to be Bette Davis." (Diamond 90)

<sup>152</sup> Davis in fact becomes a character in one of Kennedy's later works.

boundary themes. Importantly, as a kaleidoscope is a burst of multiple colors, Sara as *kaleidophone* employs more than two linguistic styles. Part of our production experiment proposed approaches to character through multiple voices. What would it mean to have an actor shift their vocal delivery throughout the play? But it was not clear at first how sound might become means by which to initiate a discourse on race. What if that shift was based on commonly held perceptions linking racial identity to voice and diction?

The initial idea was to worry the boundaries of traditional characterization (one actor playing as specific, fixed character) by infusing the actors' character study with Marvin Carlson's ideas about theatrical "ghosting." In *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory*, Carlson argues that trace memories associated with physical spaces or events affect subsequent events in the same spaces. Carlson describes this ghosting effect as the "process of using the memory of previous encounters to understand and interpret encounters with new and somewhat different but apparently similar phenomena." (6)

*Funnyhouse* is a play of ghosts, of the residue of interiorized, dead or dying selves. Sarah constructs her imaginary companions by reflecting, recollecting, and re/membering them through the filter of her experience. In response, we imagined the actors' character work as a relational process wedding present meaning (historical namesake of each figure) with personal understanding (Sarah's epistemological path to each character.) Such a process involves creating space for the actors to play with and expose different layers of the collage at any given moment. Characterization might change beat to beat, but all of the associated histories remain as subtext. Thus, Nicole Delguidice's performance as The Duchess of Hapsburg not only involves a study of the historical figure. It also invokes Bette Davis through a vocal imitation of Davis' rapid, 1940's delivery. It might even, after a spin of the *kaleidophone*, conjure imagined biographical moments: Sarah's mother screaming at Sarah while the girl watches *Juarez* in the next room, for instance.

In this aspect, voice offers a way to produce rapid, seamless shifts from ghost to ghost. To begin, it is from a production standpoint, technically easy. Voice serves as an

effective theatrical device for rapid, frequent character shifts. Just as the three actors in classical Greek theater used masks to rotate through characters with relative logistical ease, the voice serves as a flexible guise of character in this production of *Funnyhouse*. Varying identity through vocal sound operates without the need of program notes or of new technical elements. Thematically, I discovered that when inflecting character variance along the lines of race, voice offers a broad, readily accessible set of assumptions to play against. A contemporary American audience already carries the ghosts of social assumption concerning racial phenotype and diction. Studies have shown that Americans often deduce race based on phonemic cues.<sup>153</sup> Given that the voice functions as frequent episteme of race, it is logical to expect that blending “raced” sounds might intervene essentialisms central to racial categorization. The central question of this chapter asks how the use of *multi-characterization* (arrangements of multiple voices for individual actors) in this production, intertwines themes of race, subjectivity, and memory, and allows performance traditions to collide into new dramaturgical constellations.

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<sup>153</sup> See **Christina G. Foreman**, “Identification of African-American English dialect from prosodic cues.” *SALSA VII: Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Symposium About Language and Society* (Austin: Texas Linguistic Forum 43, 1999) 57-66; **John Baugh**, “Perceptions with a variable paradigm: Black and White detection and identification based on speech” *Focus on the USA: Varieties of English Around the World* (Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 1996) 169-182; **Thomas Purnell, William Idsardi, and John Baugh** “Perceptual and Phonetic Experiments on American English Dialect Identification” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 18 (1999): 10-30; **Norman Lass, John Tecca, Robert Mancuso, and Wanda Black**, “The Effect of Phonetic Complexity on Speaker Race and Sex Identifications,” *Journal of Phonetics* 7 (1979): 105-118; **Norman Lass, Celest Almerino, Laurie Jordan, and Jane Walsh**, “The Effect of Filtered Speech on Speaker Race and Sex Identifications,” *Journal of Phonetics* 8 (1980): 101-112; **Julie Walton and Robert Orlikoff**, “Speaker Race Identification from Acoustic Cues in the Vocal Signal,” *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research* 37 (1986): 738-745; and **Erik R. Thomas and Jeffrey Reaser**, “Delimiting Perceptual Cues Used for the Ethnic Labeling of African American and European American Voices,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 8.1 (2004): 54-87.

## ARRANGEMENTS OF MULTIPLE VOICES FOR INDIVIDUAL ACTORS

### Sarah

Feliz McDonald's portrayal of the Negro Sarah offers a feast for the critical ear tuned to the discussion of voice and identity. McDonald is an African American actor playing an African American character that is *immersed-in-yet-fleeing* her African-American-ness, an identity whose core shifts like the walls and drapes Kennedy describes in her stage directions. Sometimes that identity is a genetic disease; at other times it is her hair; at other times it is her bohemian tastes; at other times it is her sound. In response, McDonald navigates acres of dialogue with a dynamic vocal strategy to produce a kaleidophonic character, one whose sound shifts and mutates which each turn of the plot wheel. In many ways, vocal sound carries Sarah's personal and generational history.

Subject to "phonemic profiling," the voice positions racial identity as one of the ghosting elements of both real people and characters on stage. But McDonald spins the wheel of her kaleidophone to complicate that tendency. Her initial sound in the opening monologue undercuts any expectations that tether the African American body to the production of "Black" speech:

**NEGRO:** Part of the time I live with Raymond, part of the time with God, Maxmillian and Albert Saxe Coburg. I live in my room. It is a small room on the top floor of a brownstone in the West Nineties in New York, a room filled with my dark old volumes, a narrow bed and on the wall old photographs of castles and monarchs of England. It is also Victoria's chamber... I am an English major, as my mother was when she went to school in Atlanta. My father majored in social work. I am graduated from a city college and have occasional work in libraries, but mostly spend my days preoccupied with the placement and geometric position of words on paper. I write poetry filling White page after White page with imitations of Edith Sitwell. (Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* 5)

On the page, the text leans toward Standard American English (SAE) diction. As written, it does not follow any of the common stylistic conventions for writing AAE used

by many other African American poets, playwrights, and novelists of the 1960s, nor does it allude to AAE through grammatical constructions as seen in Wilson's scripts. Post *Raisin* and post-Renaissance, scripting with Standard American English is a significant dramaturgical choice for a Black playwright of Kennedy's era.

In performance, McDonald affects what some might describe as a "White sound" for this opening monologue. To be more specific, McDonald executes clear final consonants on *part*, and *Raymond*. She strengthens her pronunciation of /ɹ/ sounds, and presents definitive rhotic coloring on words like *part* and *Albert* and *Coburg*. Her pronunciation of *England* is very thin and heady through each of the nasal sounds. In terms of vowel production, the rules of Standard American English suggest that the first syllable vowel in *brownstone* be formed as the diphthong (two vowel blend) /aʊ/, as in "owl" or "out." Most speakers of AAE will reduce rather than add vowel sounds, and so will execute something closer to a nasalized, low front rounded single target vowel, as in /œ/ for /brœnston/. But McDonald creates a near triphthong (three vowel blend) /ɪaʊ/. Along with a tendency to use a high-rising terminal (making statements sound like questions), McDonald gives her opening lines a "Valley"-like quality. Taken in its entirety, her delivery is not a strict application of classic 1980s Valspeak, but she does periodically present along those lines, making clear diction choices outside of her everyday speech patterns. Taken alone, McDonald's sound could mean nothing, and to assert that this character hates herself or faces an existential crisis because of her speech patterns is, of course, untenable and essentialist. But given that Sarah, by her own admission, seeks to be not Black, and seeks to be White, the sounds present in this opening monologue take on new meaning. Her more stylized presentations suggest that she is pushing beyond the [often lauded] neutral intelligibility of Standard American English in search of character.

Moments later, a second clue that voice may speak to her crisis of identity begins to present itself. McDonald slips into a standard British (Received Pronunciation) dialect



when she introduces the statue of Queen Victoria sitting in one corner of her brownstone apartment. “It is also Victoria’s chamber. Queen Victoria Regina’s.” She bows deeply, re-enters Valspeak diction, and articulates the details of her fantasy world: that the figures we see on stage are the selves she pretends to be when she is alone in the room. After a beat, she bounces back into Received Pronunciation for an aristocratic affect: “When I am the Duchess of Hapsburg I sit opposite Victoria in my headpiece and we talk.” She lapses once more into Valspeak to admit that in the world outside, she is an English student at a city college in New York.

At first, the actor does not seem to pursue character shifts through dialect; there is little sense in these initial switchback moments that she *becomes* a different character with each shift in diction. Rather, it is playful, and more akin to a child amusing herself with dolls. Adding voices simply thickens the imaginary world she is creating. However, when Sarah holds onto the accent for more than a few beats, a new sub-textual dynamic enters the performance. By holding on to the playfulness for so long, McDonald exposes the accent as more than simple play. It begins to read more like desire. She spins, twirls, and bows like a princess, smiles and giggles, suggesting that pleasure rules these talks and this way of talking. When she returns to the topic of the statue, she slips back into the mock British accent to relay the details of her “conversation” with the Queen:

**NEGRO:** Victoria always wants me to tell her of Whiteness. She wants me to tell her of a royal world where everything and everyone is White and there are no unfortunate Black ones. For as we of royal blood know, Black is evil and has been from the beginning. Even before my mother's hair started to fall out. Before she was raped by a wild Black beast. Black was evil. (Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* 5)

Then the wave of pleasure suddenly dissipates. Its quick evaporation leaves a scar in its absence. This talk of Evil Blackness conjures images of her mother’s insanity. Sarah believes Blackness, embodied by her father, the “wild Black beast,” caused the madness. Sarah emerges from the accent to deliver the two lines about her mother and the rape: “Even before my mother's hair started to fall out. Before she was raped by a

wild Black beast.” She tries to reengage the accent for the last line, “Black was evil.” But like a sleeper shaken out of a pleasant dream, though she closes her eyes, she cannot re-enter the reverie.

The play with Received Pronunciation is intriguing given, as Rosemary Curb observes, how Kennedy’s approach to character revisits race as a cultural contrast of manners and behavior. Curb notes:

Kennedy’s characters are obsessed with the contrast between the imagined elegance and manners of White European royalty and nobility (especially of the past) and the filthiness and vulgarity of contemporary Black American life in the ghettos of northern cities or the rural South. (180)

Here the production has set that contrast in vocal sound through MacDonald’s dialect play in the first monologue. Whiteness in sound signifies elegance and pleasure. It would seem that her negrophobia— and its attending blancophilia— manifest sonically through McDonald’s [or perhaps Sarah’s] diction choice.

In each instance, McDonald has chosen a “White” sound for the African American character she portrays. A dangerously broad statement, yes, but what I mean is that these affectations of the voice sound White in the sense that they consist of qualities derived from two socilects associated with White people. Also, given Sarah’s desire to not be black, McDonald’s initial diction choice plays upon traditional discourses on sonic authenticity within some African American communities. In some place, there are unwritten conventions that one “sounds White,” when one does not sound Black. In fact, a monolithic understanding of Blackness might even go so far as to suggest that because Sarah does not sound Black, she is not truly Black.<sup>154</sup> And yet McDonald is

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<sup>154</sup> Sounding white holds a special place in the hearts of many speakers of AAE. While it is broadly applied, it is poorly demarcated. Amanda LaShaye Strickland (2010) “Sounding White”: African-American Attitudes Toward “Whiteness” in the Speech of African-Americans,” provides an in depth investigation of “sounding white” and its politics within the African American community. Also see Sara Trechter & Mary Bucholtz, (2001). “White noise: Bringing language into whiteness studies.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. 11(1)3-21; Lisa M. Koch, Alan M. Gross, & Russell Kolts, (2001) “Attitudes toward Black English and code switching.” *Journal of Black Psychology*, 27, 29-42; and Andrew C.

phenotypically Black, and Sarah is described as The Negro.

McDonald plants an important dramaturgical seed of cross-talking, through the interplay of voice and corporeal expectation during this opening monologue. In vacillating between playful Valspeak and Standard British dialect, she establishes multivocality as a theatrical convention, and this convention will erupt with sonic violence later on in the play. The actor's diction choices and her presence as an African American body on stage lay sound on the table as a vessel for the play's central dramatic conflict. By play's end, diction functions as a record of Sarah's gradual breakdown (or discovery). The change in how she sounds mirrors the crumbling of her "fortress against recognition." (Kennedy, FHN 6) Kennedy's compression of time, both psychic and real, means that this erosion appears *in medias res* from the opening monologue.

While Sarah relies on her "White voice" to begin her narrative, McDonald allows hints of her capacity for Black sound to creep through the veil even in her opening monologue. Interestingly, the first hints of her capacity for "Black sound" does not emerge through diction, but rather erupt structurally and rhetorically. Sarah's fantasy moment has again devolved into thoughts of her father. She confesses that she bludgeoned her father's face with an ebony mask. Reeling from the realization, she gathers her composure, laughs, touches her hair, and describes her Negro feature. Suddenly the figures, frozen in shadow until this moment; Victoria, the Duchess, and a hunchback Jesus animate, laugh, and babble with boisterous energy. Sarah launches back into her speech, but this time she engages a bizarre call and response with the Queen, somewhat reminiscent of a Sunday sermon.

Sarah calls: She begins with a strikingly King-esque testimonial declaration, "I know places!" At the hem of her line, the Queen laughs with a single, diaphragmatic, punctuating "Ha!" Sarah returns the volley, shouting, "*That is, I cannot believe in*

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Billings (2005). Beyond the Ebonics debate: Attitudes about Black and Standard American English. *Journal of Black Studies*, 36, 68-81.

places.” The Queen responds again, “Ha!” Sarah calls out a longer refrain in response, inflecting the exchange, but not damaging its rhythm: “*To believe in places is to know hope and to know the emotion of hope is to know beauty. It links us across a horizon and connects us to the world.*” In the place one might hear “Amen” during a church service, the congregation, Sarah’s figments, laugh. She continues. “*I find there are no places only my Funnyhouse.*” Sarah and the figments devolve into the boisterous laugh of encroaching insanity. Where the pew shouts hallelujah, the Duchess and Jesus double up; where parishioners catch the spirit, Sarah and her queen devolve into hysterics. Sarah gathers herself, moves away from the Duchess, and tries to continue her sermon. “*Streets are rooms, cities are rooms, eternal rooms.*” Here the queen does not respond with the punctuating single laugh, but in retrospect (retro-audit?) there is a clear rhythmic space left for it. Instead of her punctuated single laugh, the Queen extends the volume and pitch of laughter already in progress. Following this bridge in the music, Sarah rounds the final curve of her testimonial, hollering, “*I try to create a space for my selves in cities, New York, the Midwest, a southern town, but it becomes a lie!*” Then as Sarah finishes her line, a knock on the wall<sup>155</sup> by the restless spirit of her father, takes the place of the Queen’s response.

<<KNOCK>>

Sarah is jolted. The figments retreat and grow silent. Out of Sarah’s line of vision, Lumumba, the ghost of her father steps onto the stage. Sarah calls out the final third of her impromptu blues. She is unaccompanied, alone, and deeply troubled:

I try to give my selves a logical relationship but that too is a lie. For relationships was one of my last religions. I clung loyally to the lie of relationships, again and again seeking to establish a connection between my characters. Jesus is Victoria’s son. Mother loved my father before her

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<sup>155</sup> A detonation, really. Our stage manager Franklin Haley took great pleasure producing this effect, getting the audience to jump in their seats by slamming a rubber mallet against a hollow wooden box. The box was pushed up against the wall of the lighting booth, directly behind the audience in a small, sixty seat gallery theater. He broke three mallets over the course of the production.

hair fell out. A loving relationship exists between myself and Queen Victoria, a love between myself and Jesus but they are lies. (Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* 7)

The Blackness of sound rests in the rhythmic exchange between Sarah and the other characters, her congregation, if you would. But the ghost's entrance into the rhythm unsettles Sarah. She tries to retreat from the call and response by backing into sound schemes she has used at the top of her monologue. She croons in Received Pronunciation, "*A loving relationship exists between myself and Queen Victoria, a love between myself and Jesus.*" Yet even in the midst of her anglophilia, Black sound escapes, perhaps appropriately, when she says "Jesus." McDonald strikes the first syllable of Jesus very hard, and extends the first vowel sound, before drawing the second syllable quickly back to her. It is an articulation from the African American Christian South, one I can recall hearing frequently in my grandfather's church in Mississippi. Its insertion within a line delivered using standard British diction might elsewhere seem out of place. But Sarah's emotional instability frames the shift as a kind of Freudian slip. That is, in the midst of playfulness, that state of relaxed inhibitions characterizing both sport and madness, that which lurks beneath the façade of Sarah's socialization escapes. And it is unclear whether this is a performance choice, or the case of an actor's immersion in the moment. But it is delicate, and it works. McDonald briefly, subtly reacts to the sound with embarrassment and dismay. But before she can sort out the crossed signals and errant sound waves, Mrs. Conrad enters and interrupts the fantasy.

### **Mrs. Conrad**

The landlady, Mrs. Conrad, (Kacy Todd), complicates the dynamic of racialized voice in the performance. In the world of the play, Mrs. Conrad exists outside of Sarah's fantasy of royalty and idyllic Whiteness. Rather, Conrad and Sarah's boyfriend Raymond represent the world from which Sarah retreats. Conrad is the landlady of Sarah's West Nineties brownstone. She appears three times in the play, each time

entering Sarah's room uninvited, like a nurse in the asylum. Her monologues are dub "versions" of narratives told elsewhere in the play— changing-same opinions regarding Sarah's strange décor; the death of Sarah's father; and Sarah's mother's breakdown. Conrad inflects these narratives with a new perspective, at times hinting at alternate truths surrounding each. For the most part, Conrad's versions of the narratives are derisive. She laughs at Sarah's ramblings, and mocks the young woman's dysfunctional relationship with her father. In her last appearance, Conrad is the first to find Sarah's corpse after the young woman has hung herself. But rather than collapse from shock or swell with pity, Conrad offers only more derision. She laughs at Sarah, even in death. "The poor bitch has hung herself," she chuckles.

As a White woman, Conrad also represents an important contrast to Sarah's conception of Whiteness, and particularly of White femininity. Where the Queen and the Duchess are regal, Conrad is common. Where the imperial twins offer Sarah solace and confirmation, Conrad is disdainful. These differences extend to the arena of sound as well. Sarah's vocal Whiteness moves back and forth between two extreme sociolects: Valspeak and Received British pronunciations. The Duchess and the Queen also affect a heightened "Trans-Atlantic" diction<sup>156</sup>-- that stage sound tailored for American classical actors. In contrast, Todd delivers Conrad with a very colloquial, Standard American

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<sup>156</sup> Trans-Atlantic diction refers to a system of stage dialect as articulated by Robert Hobbs in *Teach Yourself Transatlantic: Theatre Speech for Actors* (1986). Hobbs describes a diction program designed for American actors of classical or versed text. For Hobbs, the need for an American classical diction scheme arises from his observation of American actors trying (and failing) to approximate RP in the performance of Shakespeare and Greek versed dramatic texts. The sound of Trans-Atlantic, with very rounded vowels and diminished /ɹ/ is reminiscent of American film actors of the 1930s and 40s like Katherine Hepburn, Cary Grant, Orson Welles, and, coincidentally, Bette Davis. The ensuing wave of American film actors, the Marlon Brandos and Humphrey Bogarts, sent this sound out of vogue, but Hobbs maintains this "Mid-Atlantic accent" has a viable place on the American classical stage. Be that as it may, "Trans-Atlantic" conjures the triangle trade and Trans-Atlantic slavery in my mind. The post Imperial reconnection of Black people in Africa, the Americas, and Europe through reggae, jazz, and Hip Hop might provide grounds for an appropriation of the term "Trans-Atlantic diction" for Black Studies scholarship. Related, see also Erik R. Thomas & Guy Bailey. (1998.) "Parallels between vowel subsystems of African American Vernacular English and Caribbean Anglophone Creoles." *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* 13: 267-296 for a more academic consideration of dialect parallels across the Diaspora.

English accent. Her diction is neutral in the traditional diction sense, but reads as middle class, White Midwestern. The neutrality of SAE remains debatable in my mind.<sup>157</sup> Due

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<sup>157</sup> General or Standard American is a problem for linguists and speech teachers in part because there is no definitive authority on its pronunciation. Whereas Dutch, French, and Spanish can at least in name cite a standard setting entity for the execution of these languages, (Nederlandse Taalunie, Académie Française, and Real Academia Española, respectively), U.S. English has no such institutional linguistic authority. In my experience as a voice and diction instructor, certain pedagogical problems arise when students ask for the definitive rules of American English. Without a universal standard, how might speech pathologists or accent reduction instructors steer their clients toward sounds that help them to communicate more effectively? Standard English is often considered the speech of educated individuals. While this is still problematic (what is considered educated?), steering speakers toward a sound recognizable among an intended audience might be one approach. But with broadcasting the voice to larger populations through television, radio, and eventually satellite, some US schools of speech instruction locate the clearest, most widely understandable version of American English in the Midwest—Nebraska, Iowa, and Kansas. Yet as, Linguistics professor Matthew J. Gordon, suggests, in truth Standard American is an attempt to achieve an idealized accentless American. (MacNeil) Accents are a relative phenomenon; the only speech without accent is silence. (And I am told that even those who sign carry accents) The pronunciations suggested by the Longman Pronunciation Dictionary, the Merriam Webster *Pronouncing Dictionary of American English*, or the *NBC Handbook of Pronunciation* entomb a sound that really does not exist, save in the mouths of actors and performers.

Along those lines, acting teacher Natalie Baker-Shirer's "How Hamlet Lost His Drawl" articulates the purpose for teaching actors how to speak Standard American English:

"Standard American," in the context of dramatic speech, means one single standard of speech that will sound American — simple, unaffected and distinct, devoid of regional influences. Although there is no official Standard American speech, there is a range of acceptability. In real life, as opposed to the theater, all accents, dialects and regionalisms of a language are valid. But, in the theater, we deal with the dramatic expression of the written word. As a professor of speech for actors, I want to teach a manner of speech that communicates the content of the written word with clarity and consistency. That is why I teach students to speak "Standard American" English, without regionalisms, accents or dialects.... In learning to speak for the theater, a student learns the 39 sounds of Standard American English, as defined by the International Phonetic Association. These sounds are used to communicate spoken English in a way that conveys no information beyond the content of the words themselves. In an American production of Shakespeare's "Hamlet," for example, we want the audience to be involved with Hamlet's problem and how he attempts to solve it. We don't want it to be distracted by the thought that Hamlet seems to be from Texas. Standard American English relieves the audience of wondering about where Hamlet learned his original speech patterns. (MacNeil)

While textual clarity and an absence of distraction are important for the actor, I would nevertheless argue that even Standard American English provides "information beyond the content of the words themselves. It tells us that this is a trained actor, for one, which can be enough to disrupt the illusion of realism. It can also link high art with regionless-ness, classless-ness, and ethnicityless-ness— qualities which align with what Peggy McIntosh identifies as part of the "invisible package" of whiteness. McIntosh writes: "My schooling followed the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think

to its place in American media and performance, Standard American English represents a voice without affect. Its pervasiveness as the target accent in voice training normalizes White Midwestern-ness as the “*vocis-franca*” in the United States, the appropriate diction of newscasters and game show hosts regardless of ethnicity. It is intended as a sound that is region-less, ethnicity-less, objective, and neutral. By extension, it asserts a speaker unconcerned with questions of identity. But in a performance like *Funnyhouse*, where all sound bears meaning, Todd’s use of Standard American English carries specific thematic weight. Played next to Conrad’s “untouched” diction, Sarah’s kaleidophonic array amplifies her psychological instability.

To complicate matters, Todd does not remain in Standard American English diction throughout her three appearances. During her second appearance, Conrad’s mockery of Sarah and of her father devolves into minstrel caricature. Conrad bursts into the apartment, seemingly midway through getting ready for a dinner party. She is dressed in a robe, hair half done, with make-up covering half of her face. She delivers her monologue into a Bluetooth nestled in her ear, speaking and laughing even as she tromps down the stairs:

He wrote to her saying he loved her and asked her forgiveness. He begged her to take him off the cross (He had dreamed she would.), stop them from tormenting him, the one with the chicken and his cursing father. Her mother's hair fell out, the race's hair fell out because he left Africa, he said. He had tried to save them. She must embrace him. He said his existence depended on her embrace. He wrote her from Africa where he is creating his Christian center in the jungle and that is why he came here. I know that he wanted her to return there with him and not desert the race. (Kennedy, FHN 18)

Sarah and her figments remain on stage, though Conrad does not see them. Oblivious to their presence, Conrad re-enacts an encounter between Sarah and her father to which she had been witness. The father had come to see Sarah in the hallway of the

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of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow them to be more like us” (10)



brownstone, but Sarah had rejected him. As the father, Conrad slips into diction reminiscent of minstrelsy:

Fo'gibeness, Sa'ah, is it dat you will nebba fo'give me fo' being' Black?  
Sa'ah! I knows you was [were] a child o' to'men'. But forgiveness?  
(Kennedy, FHN 17)

On “*forgiveness*,” “*forgive*,” “*for*,” and “*torment*,” Todd drops the r-coloration to produce “*fu'giv*” and “*to'men*’”. She also turns the “*th*” (/ð/) in “*that*” into /d/. She flattens the vowel sound in “*child*” (/aɪ/) and drops the final /d/ to create “*chahle*.” These maneuvers in dialect, along with the play’s sideshow title and structure, and cosmetic inversion of burnt cork, connect *Funnyhouse* to the minstrel tradition. In both traditional minstrel performance and in the miscegenation narrative,<sup>158</sup> Black speech was a comedic lampoon of an imagined Blackness, parodying its qualities and mocking its ambitions. In *Funnyhouse*, however, this minstrel moment seeks to decry Sarah’s complex of racial identification with little expectation of laughter from the audience or any sense of spectatorial collusion. Rather, it represents an uncomfortable display of cruelty, an unrequested outing of insecurities. In the case of Conrad, audio blackface functions as a mouthpiece of doubt: “*This is what they think of you, white glass table or not.*”

And so Conrad continues. She laughs hard, snorts a line of cocaine from her wrist, and looks around for something else with which to amuse herself. Eventually she finds the carved wooden mask that Lumumba has been carrying. She picks it up from the floor, and invents another blackface voice. This time she caricatures Sarah’s grandmother, and dances about with the mask like Josephine Baker. “*I want you ta be Jesus, ta walk in Genesis and save de race,*” Conrad laughs, “*return to Af’ica! Fin’ rebelation in de Black.*”” She can barely speak for the laughter. But upstage, the

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<sup>158</sup> The 19th century dramatic sub-genre focused on protagonists of indeterminate racial lineage often incorporated the vocal and musical elements of blackface performance for comic relief or local color. See chapter one, “Miscegenation Narrative” for a more complete description.

figments begin to reanimate. The Victoria statue opens her eyes. The Duchess moves stage left of the throne. She pantomimes placing a noose around her own neck. Mrs. Conrad shimmies, as if in front of a mirror, laughing and preaching in minstrel dialect:

From the beginning in the kerosene lamp of their dark rooms, she said, "Wally, I wan' you ta be Jesus, ta walk in Genesis and save de race. You muss return ta Af'ica, Wally, fin' rebelation in de midst of go'den sabannas, nim and White frank-o-penny treeses and White stallionses roamin' under a blue sky. Wally, you muss fin' de White dove— (Kennedy, FHN 19) <sup>159</sup>

As she begins this last line, Conrad holds the mask up to her face. She stiffens suddenly, and Conrad's laughter dies unexpectedly. There is a knock, similar to that which interrupted Sarah and the Queen. The ghostly knock on the wall soon becomes a pulse. Conrad finds she cannot remove the mask, as if possessed, and speaks using a voice not entirely her own:

—heal the pain of the race, heal the misery of the Black man, Wally, take us off the cross, Wally. In the kerosene light she stared at me anguished from her old Negro face. But she ran past him leaving him. And now he is dead, she says, now he is dead. He left Africa and now Patrice Lumumba is dead. (Kennedy, FHN 19)

Todd shifts away from minstrel dialect during this portion. She also deepens her pitch, and shifts her resonance lower into her chest. Toward the end of the passage she adds a bit of rasp to her voice.

After she finishes "delivering the message," Conrad drops the mask to the floor. She stares at it for a brief moment, and then bolts back up the stairs, slamming the door.

The shifts here are telling. Todd is a White actor and in this sequence she attempts three Black voices, two male and one female. The first two are caricatured throwbacks to the minstrel stage. But the last voice, the voice of the force which the mask invites into her body, is distinctly different. This voice moves out from the eaves

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<sup>159</sup> The initial characterization was far less extreme. In fact, it was not until after the opening performance that we intensified the "minstrelization" of this moment.

of caricature to align more closely with AAE's common rules. While not a flawless recreation, one can still hear the traditional markers of AAE in Todd's speech. Todd lowers the "er" ([ɜ]) in "kerosene" and "stared," and drops the final consonant in "past." There is a slight level tone execution in "Ne-gro" and a sermonic prosody to the way she says "And now he is *dead*, she says, now he is *dead*. He left Africa and now Patrice Lumumba is *dead*." It is as if she performs a call and response exchange with herself within the line.

The phonemic analysis presented here was not a part of our rehearsal process or preparatory work prior to performance. We did consciously work to explore character through vocalization, but not at the phonemic level as one might in a conventional dialect study. My production notes reveal coaching responses tied to pitch, rhythm, and Uta Hagan's object questions. (i.e., Who is this spirit? Where is it lodged in the body? What year was it when they had the kerosene lamp conversation?) These were questions posed to help the actor create character. Eventually, as the character took shape, I did begin to consider the sonic details of what the actors were doing—the phonemic specificity needed to avoid stereotype, to prevent very profound moments from becoming comedic, to achieve a plausible illusion for fictional circumstances.

This is an interesting moment because two different conceptions of Black vocalicity occur so close together. The minstrel sound is still ringing in the audience's ear when the Avatar of Blackness speaks. But proximity highlights some of the differences. Absent are the faulty grammar, mispronunciations, and malapropism that Todd injects into father and grandmother's speech. There are no "I'ses," "*treeeses*" or "*stallionsees*." Todd refrains from the hyper-enunciations that marks audio blackface, but also from the grinning, laughing, and dancing that tie minstrel dialect to Black stereotypes. Instead, she is rigid with possession and lowers the register of her voice as befits a dirge.

It would have been simpler to send the actor back to a Standard American English accent, or even stretch her to a Trans-Atlantic sound while possessed. Yet these kinds of

seemingly idiosyncratic performance choices carry meanings that exceed the production. Characters on stage regularly imbue their accoutrement with the weight of their personalities. Props, set pieces, even lighting cues and leitmotifs become surrogates of the characters to which they connect. They can even continue to ghost those characters and broadcast those meanings beyond the performance. Voice is no less susceptible. Thus to voice the powerful, godlike force possessing Conrad with a Standard American English accent normalizes that sound, privileges that sound<sup>160</sup>, and alienates all others. Conversely, rooting it in recognizably Black vocal sound not only insinuates that the force is African-derived, but further links Blackness to authority, dignity, and power, albeit exclusively masculine. Tragically, it is a power that Sarah fails to recognize and harness; instead the whispers of her congregation drown out its song.

### **Patrice Lumumba**

Voice and identity converge again at the center of a scene we dubbed “The Queen’s Chamber.” This particular section sits about two thirds of the way through the play following a scene between Raymond and the Duchess. The section encompasses two important monologues, one by Lumumba and one by Sarah. At the beginning of the scene, Patrice Lumumba (Leroy Beck) emerges from the shadows. He steps behind a screen of muslin stretched across a free standing doorway. Backlight envelopes him as begins to speak. It is the first significant stretch of text in the play for Lumumba. He pushes against the placenta-like screen, testing for weakness in the barrier, seeking a way out (or in). As he pushes and caresses the screen, he speaks, retrieving a portion of Sarah’s opening monologue. He reclaims her words, but injects important differences in the text and applies his own stylistic signature:

**MAN (PATRICE LUMUMBA)** I am a nigger of two generations. I am Patrice Lumumumba. I am a nigger of two generations. I am the Black

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<sup>160</sup> Consider again Scourby as the voice of God.

shadow that haunted my mother's conception. (Kennedy, FHN 12)

To begin, the delivery is marked by the Black Arts and Hip Hop reclamation of that hotly contested word “nigger.”<sup>161</sup> Its reclamation by each movement rests largely on how the word is pronounced. Certainly some find any iteration of the word degrading; but others hear an important connotative distinction between *nigger*, with a hard rhotic ending, and *nigguh*, with its cool, mid-central finish. During his monologue, Beck juxtaposes the two pronunciations in a strategic play on racial identity through diction.

Beck begins with the affirmative pronunciation, and shifts the inflection on his first line— “I am a *nigguh* of two generations—” to interrogate rather than declare. Yet unlike the high-rising terminal of Valspeak, Beck’s interrogative anticipates a response. Beck’s delivery dares the listener to respond, as if subtextually he is saying, “*You ain’t even know, but I’m going to show you.*” His “*nigger*” here is clearly executed as “*nigguh*.” Lacking a response, Beck swaggers forward vocally, declaring, “I am Patrice Lumuuuuuuuuuuuuumba.” He stretches of the “mu” into a howl. With the sound, he extends the reach of his existential declaration over all “*nigguhs*.” He tells the listener that *We* are all Patrice Lumumba, that his tale is not only an index of us all, but also a warning. His third line declares, again executing the affirmative pronunciation of “*nigguh*.” He confirms the extent of his net and the enormity of his solidarity. Lumumba then seals his dictum of self affirming Blackness by sermonizing the second syllable of “*conception*” with an unanticipated spike in inflection and volume.

On stage, Sarah has collapsed into a weeping puddle of existential confusion. Jesus and the Duchess crouch to her right. Lumumba stands behind the doorway screen at stage left. Sarah is torn between the two forces. Lumumba, having just reclaimed Blackness from *Evil* and refined it into a progressive howl, looks down on Sarah for the

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<sup>161</sup> See Geneva Smitherman, *Black Talk*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994) and “‘The Chain Remain the Same’.” *Journal of Black Studies* 28 (1997); Jabari Asim, *The N Word* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

first time in the monologue, and also sees the forces (Jesus and the Duchess) with which he must contend. Appropriately, he shifts his approach. With his next line, he steps from behind the screen, and Beck adopts a “Whiter” sound—unreduced consonant clusters, comprehensive voicing of consonant sounds, execution of the full final angma sound [ŋ] in words ending “ng”, non-lowering of the [ɛr], standard English production of syllabic stress patterns, and a pattern of rising final intonation. In effect, he code-switches to soften the moment:

I belong to the generation born at the turn of the century and the generation born before the depression. At present I reside in New York City in a brownstone in the West Nineties. I am an English major at a city college. (Kennedy, FHN 12)

As he steps out, Jesus, Victoria, and Hapsburg hiss at him defensively. They regard his approach as a threat to their existence; in Sarah’s world there can be no co-existence, no peaceful blending of Blackness and Whiteness. Rather, the product is always tragic, always sullied, always frail and doomed. Yet Lumumba, to sound less threatening, slips into the garb of Whiteness through his voice:

My nigger father majored in social work, so did my mother. I am a student and have occasional work in libraries. But mostly I spend my vile days preoccupied with the placement and geometric position of words on paper. I write poetry filling white page after white page with imitations of Sitwell. It is my vile dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my statue of Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, and oriental carpets and to eat my meals on a white glass table. It is also my nigger dream for my friends to eat their meals on white glass tables and to live in rooms with European antiques, photographs of Roman ruins, pianos and oriental carpets. (Kennedy, FHN 13)

He assuages their fears by landing the hard rhotic “nigger” each time, in stark contrast to his first two uses of the word. He laughs stiffly and repaints the picture—Sitwell, antiques, carpets, White glass table— all with careful Standard American English diction. He lulls them even as he speaks of dissolution and death:

My friends will be white. I need them as an embankment to keep me from

reflecting too much upon the fact that I am Patrice Lumumba who haunted my mother's conception. They are necessary for me to maintain recognition against myself. My white friends, like myself, will be shrewd intellectuals and anxious for death. (Kennedy, FHN 13)

But his sound soon returns to the rhetorical foundation presented at the beginning of the monologue. Creeping downstage to whisper in Sarah's ear, he realigns his sound to AAE's segmental rules and to African American sermonic prosody:

Anyone's death. I will despise them as I do myself. For if I did not despise myself then my hair would not have fallen and if my hair had not fallen then I would not have bludgeoned my father's face with the ebony mask (Kennedy, FHN 13)

Jesus and the Duchess hear Lumumba's vocal mask fall away. They turn and drive him from Sarah. Sarah, however, huddles against the floor. Lumumba's spoken word intrusion— her own testimonial uttered from a different mouth, with a different voice, and on rhythms other than her own— unsettles something in her. Lumumba's speech marks a turn in the action of the play, and his play with vocal identity underlines this dramatic swing. The Black self he represents has finally emerged, and, rather than repress the encroaching Darkness, Sarah succumbs to it. The separation between reality, memory, and contrivance blurs, and so too do the distinctions between Sarah's vocal identities. Through the ensuing monologue, she responds to the call of Blackness. For the first time (and sadly the last time) in her life, Sarah inhabits a Blackness she has repressed since her conception.

### **The Queen's Chamber**

In the next moment, the Duchess, Victoria, and Jesus move back and forth through a series of collapsed walls while "The Negro" faces the audience and speaks. Amid these shifting figures, Sarah launches into her longest speech in the play, a far reaching seven hundred word monologue. Sarah begins with how she has dreamed of seeing her mother smile at her. But she quickly drifts back to her father and to the

memory of his mother, Sarah's grandmother:

I always dreamed of a day when my mother would smile at me. My father ... his mother wanted him to be Christ. From the beginning in the lamp of their dark room she said— (Kennedy, FHN 14)

Sarah then re-enacts the exchange between mother and son. In performance, McDonald becomes the grandmother, and we witness her laying the charge to Wally, Sarah's father. She wants her son to mission in Africa and "save the race." It is an important moment as it is the first time in the play that we hear anything positive about Blackness or Africa. Conrad's previous monologue contains many of the same words. But Todd's delivery is so mean-spirited that it negates the grandmother's fantasies of Africa. Conversely, McDonald's invocation of the grandmother depicts an idyllic continent of "golden savannas, nim and white frankopenny trees, white stallions roaming under a blue sky," and "white dove[s]." While still couched in the symbolism of *White-as-pure*, the description resists Sarah's previous proclamations of Blackness-as-evil. As her mind returns to Jesus, Sarah rekindles that spark of Black sound extinguished by Conrad's abrupt entrance at the close of her first monologue:

I want you to be **JESUS**, [I want you]<sup>162</sup> to walk in Genesis and save the race. [I want you to return]<sup>163</sup> ~~You must return~~<sup>164</sup> to Africa, find revelation in the midst of golden savannas, nim and White frankopenny trees, White stallions roaming under a blue sky, you must walk with a White dove and **heal** the race, **heal** the misery, take us off the cross. (Kennedy, FHN 14)

McDonald constructs a formulaic unit, pairing Genesis and Jesus with Africa and its imagined geography.<sup>165</sup> She delivers it with a southern, church-like cadence and pronunciation. The vowel in "*white*" and "*find*" are flattened, and "*misery*" is slightly de-

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<sup>162</sup> Added in performance.

<sup>163</sup> Added in performance.

<sup>164</sup> Omitted in performance.

<sup>165</sup> See my discussion of Gerald L. Davis's sermon formulaic units in chapter four, "Who Shall I Send?"



rhoticized, with its final vowel lowered from [i] to [ɪ]. McDonald renders parallel intonations by placing the exact same stress on “*heal*” each time she says the word, digging deep and plowing to the same tonal depth within each utterance. “*Jesus*” is again a sonic thrust and grab, as is the execution of “*Genesis*.” Each becomes a spasm of sound flung out, only to be retrieved and cradled. McDonald even added “*I want you*” to the second and third phrases of the first sentence during one performance where the script did not include them. But the addition recreates an undeniable pulpit rhythm to link Sarah’s grandmother to sound commonly heard in southern, African American, Christian religious experiences.

What is more, this new sound extends beyond the dramatization of grandmother. Even as she steps out of the grandmother characterization, a residue clings to Sarah’s voice. It is as if the moment of embodiment has stirred the ashes she has been trying to extinguish. As she continues the story of her father, the story of her own roots, Sarah’s speech warms with the AAE linguistic and prosodic markers:

She stared at him anguished in the kerosene light... At dawn he watched her rise, kill a hen for him to eat at breakfast, [and] then go to work down at the big house till dusk, till she died. His father told him the race was no damn good. (Kennedy, FHN 14)

Similar to Tommy Hollis’ Avery in *The Piano Lesson*, McDonald uses tri-metric phrasing, that is, phrases performed in cadences of three: “*At dawn he watched her rise/ kill a hen for him to eat at breakfast/ [and] then go to work,*” and then again in smaller bits with: “*at the big house/till dusk/till she died.*” As with Hollis, these are sermonic phrasing markers, *not* shifts in beats or breaks to draw breath. They are marked, rather, by quick inhalations, and parallel intonation patterns. To cap things off, McDonald then hits “*His father*” with an *AMEN!*-like crescendo of inflection and volume. The pronouncement accompanies a swivel of the head away from the listener (like, “*let me tell you, girl*”), a closing of the eyes (like, “*Um, um, um*”), and a pressing out of the hands away from the body (like “*back-back,*”) She finishes with lateral neck gestures

punctuating each syllable of “*no damn good.*”

McDonald intermingles this intrusion with Beck’s riff on Black Arts sound. McDonald repeats her grandmother’s speech as the monologue builds and finds rhymes within the lines and new syncopation. The intermittent raps of the ghost in the wall merge into a pulsating drum. The simple narration becomes a ritual of sound and fire—an invocation. Speech becomes a chant, and the ritual climaxes as McDonald lengthens her vowels into a Baraka-esque<sup>166</sup> word-sound-power poem of shouts and hollers:

... to help him search for Genesis in the midst of golden savannas, nim  
and white frankopenny trees and white stallions roaming under a blue sky,  
help him search for the white doves, he wanted the Black man to make a  
pure statement, he wanted the Black man to **RIIIIIIIISE** from  
colonialism. (Kennedy, FHN 15)

Jesus emerges from the shadows and stands back to back with Sarah. She leans back in a crucifix pose as he bends at the knee and waist. She is lain on his back, and he carries her in circles, her face to the ceiling, weeping. Lumumba returns to the stage as Wally-in-the-hallway, pleading with her as she rushes past him:

**LUMUMBA:** Sarah, Sarah,

**SARAH:** He would say to me,

**LUMUMBA:** The soldiers are coming and a cross they are placing high  
on a tree and are dragging me through the grass and nailing me upon the  
cross.

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<sup>166</sup> An example, from Amiri Baraka’s poem “It’s Nation Time”

*it's nation time*  
*Boom*  
*Booom*  
*BOOOM*  
*Boom*  
*Dadadadadadadadadadad*  
*Boom*  
*Boom*  
*Boom*  
*Boom*  
*Dadadadad adadadad*  
*Hey aheee (soft) Hey ahheee (loud) Boom Boom Boom*  
*sing a get up time to nationfy (240)*

**SARAH:** My blood is gushing.

**LUMUMBA:** I wanted to live in Genesis in the midst of golden savannas,  
nim and White frankopenny trees and White stallions roaming under a  
blue sky. (Kennedy, FHN 15) <sup>167</sup>

Her words have summoned the dead. As Omi Osun Joni Jones notes, conjuring and art-making come from the same impulse as each seeks, to “bring something into being that would not otherwise have occurred.” (Jones 227) Through utterance, Sarah quarries an untapped vein of Blackness within her, first channeling her grandmother, then giving flesh to her Father’s atavism. Dramaturgically, the monologue is the apex from whence Sarah begins her final, irreversible decent into nightmare. By scene’s end, Sarah rejects the Blackness that the Lumumba/Father/avatar self represents, stallions or no, and binds herself to the alabaster funerary masks of Jesus, Victoria, and The Duchess.

#### **THE CHORAL TRADITION: INTERWEAVING THE SOUNDS OF MULTIPLE ACTORS**

*Funnyhouse of a Negro* is monstrously repetitive. Entire speeches reoccur at different points in the play. Multiple characters recite the same text with subtle differences. At times the repetitions fall in close proximity to one another. In other instances, narratives or sound bytes erupt from a pudding of screams and laughter only to sink away and re-emerge downstream. Words in this play echo from the canyon walls, echo like memory is want to do. They become the pulse; they serve as the clock as Sarah’s time ebbs away.

For Linda Kintz, the repetition represents a form of signification. Kintz argues that its linguistic and non-linguistic repetitions stem from the same cultural matrix of tonal languages that inform a similar penchant for repetition in black musical forms. (Kintz 159-60) Moreover it is a technique born of Kennedy’s childhood and reinforced during her voyage abroad when she wrote *Funnyhouse*:

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<sup>167</sup> Kennedy scripted this section as the last portion of Sarah’s monologue. In production, however, we reconstructed this portion of text as dialogue.

This rhythmic articulation sets up a kind of mystical effect, which also draws on something whose ground is Europe and Hollywood and West Africa. Kennedy's mother, she tells us, read the psalms to her in the kitchen on winter evenings (after listening to "Stella Dallas"). Later the effects of actresses speaking monologues from *Funnyhouse* and *The Owl Answers* suggested to her the kind of trancelike effect she felt while listening to warm, intimate readings of the psalms in her mother's kitchen and sharing troubles in women's talk around the kitchen table. After traveling to Africa the power of such rhythmic articulations took on another dimension through her encounter with African culture, which gave it "a new power, a fierce cadence." (Kintz 159-60)

Kintz's analysis reconsiders *Funnyhouse* using Harrison's lens of Kuntu drama. Here she specifically identifies Kennedy's use of repetition as a primarily African-American structural design, using a cyclical, collective dramatic structure rooted in African spiritual practices, and the "*repeated, performed word*." Kintz, filtering Harrison through Gates, further suggests that repetition intensifies the meaning of *vocal sounds and rhythms*. She writes:

"Rhythm also suggests a way of reorienting attention from the signified to the signifier and defining what is meant by the materiality of the signifier, its "thingness," as Gates argues. That is, the sense of the syntactical ordering or the semantic meaning may become secondary to the meaning making of the repeated sounds; in this way a move that "redirects attention from the semantic to the rhetorical" focuses on words as things and allows an opening for "the meanings that lie in wait along the paradigmatic axis of discourse" to bear more strongly on the syntagmatic axis (Gates 1988, 58). (Kintz 159-60)

Importantly, as Kintz notes, the dramatic weight of the ritual word, of "*repeated, performed word*" in Kuntu Drama rests not in its linguistic matter, but rather on the materiality of the uttered sound. (Kintz 147) While the "logocentric word" is not irrelevant, it is certainly not the only site of meaning, nor is it the primary source of meaning in Kuntu drama. Thus, one way to regard Kennedy's use of repetition and

clearly ritualistic intentions in *Funnyhouse* must involve an approach to the text for the *sounds and rhythms* that comprise the play. Artaudian performance and Kuntu drama converge in the understanding that theatrical events are not opportunities for bourgeois voyeurism, but represent a secular ritual in which all present beings collectively construct story, history, and inner selves. Sounds and rhythms move the susceptible interior more deeply and in more synchronous ways than do lexical methods. Logocentric performance determines too much, where as the ritualized word leaves space between “*signifier and signified.*”

### Staging Repetition

Critic Robert Scanlan hears three distinct kinds of writing at work in *Funnyhouse*. He describes these as scripted stage effects, (“tableaux, stage gimmicks, pantomimes, popup horror “visuals,”), scenes of traditional dramatic dialogue, and monologues, or “pure writing.” (96) Scanlan asserts that Kennedy then arranges these three kinds of writing into ten sequential “action” segments that comprise a linear plot despite the seemingly cyclical nature of the text.<sup>168</sup> I relied on a similar dissection of the text to pace out the script’s repetition during our staging.

From the fifth tableaux to the end of the seventh tableaux Kennedy interweaves two particular narratives that exemplify a technique characterizing the entire script. First, Kennedy revisits Sarah’s “full and precise account of herself,” a speech first delivered

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1. Prelude and ritualized waiting
  2. Sarah’s first monologue
  3. Landlady first monologue
  4. Duchess and Raymond
  5. Lumumba
  6. Sarah’s second monologue (Center of the play; framed by heads dropping)
  7. Kommos or choral threnody: Duchess and Jesus
  8. Landlady second monologue
  - \*7. (cont) Peripeteia: Jesus realizes he is black (Climax)
  9. The Jungle A choral rite of expiation.
  10. Catastrophe and epilogue

during Sarah's opening monologue. Kennedy also treats (and re-treats) the tale of Sarah's grandmother and father. The two recycled narratives are noteworthy as they occupy the dramatic center of the play, and Kennedy replays each of them through multiple characters. Their repetition also poses significant staging challenges in production that push voice and choral arrangement to the fore.

In terms of basic performance technique, the repetition in *Funnyhouse* makes memorization and sequence a challenge. In rehearsal, it was not uncommon to begin a recitation from page three, and unknowingly finish with a similar speech located ten pages later. During the ritualistic sequence of "Red Sun and Flying Things", for instance, Sarah plays out the scene of her grandmother's missionary injunction twice in the space of a two pages. In another case, Sarah and Lumumba each describe Sarah the English major who dreams of White glass tables. The text is similar, save the important linguistic and judgmental amendments that Lumumba includes:

**SARAH** I am an English major, as my mother was when she went to school in Atlanta. My father majored in social work. I am graduated from a city college and have occasional work in libraries, but mostly spend my days preoccupied with the placement and geometric position of words on paper.

**LUMUMBA** I am an English major at a city college. My nigger father majored in social work, so did my mother. I am a student and have occasional work in libraries. But mostly I spend my vile days preoccupied with the placement and geometric position of words on paper

The repetition is so omnipresent that it begs the question of why Kennedy has built a text that reverberates against itself. Deborah Thompson argues that doubling and repetition make up the structural foundation of *Funnyhouse*:

Repetitions across monologues, like repetitions within monologues, perform similar paradoxical effects, both blurring and emphasizing differences, both indoctrinating through repetition and alienating through difference. Selves constitute themselves through repetition of other selves. Internalizing white cultural denigrations of Negro identity, Negro tries to evacuate this Negro identity and become a bearer of white signifiers:" (D. Thompson, *Blackface* 28)

Equally important is the question of how to approach recurring text in performance. As they say in acting class, words repeated must to be said differently each time. Words repeated, must to be said differently, each time. Certainly, Kennedy has already infused each iteration of the text with difference. Each narrative doubling appears with new cracks in its shell, fissures that reveals new or even contradictory information. Raymond's assertion at the end of the play that Sarah's father is still alive is a perfect example. The actor's work is half done, but the remaining dramaturgical work lies in uncovering the purpose of this repetition, and its pattern, if any exists at all. Here it is useful to recall that Kennedy was by no means writing in a void. She enters the theatrical world at the fore of the Black Arts movement; its reliance on repetition, in turn, situates her work in the long stream of Black sonicity and jazz aesthetics. Osun/Jones, for example, finds this jazz aesthetic present across Kennedy's work given the playwright's focus on "the subjective experience of one character, a memory-laden sense of time and place, a keen attention to the visual/physical/ imagistic aspects of [her] work, and polyrhythmic musically driven language." (O. O. Jones, "Cast a Wide Net." 598)

Other critics similarly find a useful analytic model in musical form. David Lasker, for example, notes how the repetition found in *Funnyhouse* structurally resembles the rondo form found in the three movement concertos of Mozart and Beethoven. (Lasker)<sup>169</sup> <sup>170</sup> Unfortunately, Lasker makes his observation in passing, and does not

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<sup>169</sup> See Harry Ransom Center collection of Adrienne Kennedy's Papers, Box 9, #12, for David Lasker's essay, "Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse* of a Negro: The Dream-Play as Form," 1974.

tease out the details of his claim. Caroline Jackson Smith, who directed the Signature Theater's 1995 production of *Funnyhouse*, also heard a music form at the foundation of the play. Smith described Sarah as the "lead instrument in a piece of chamber music." (Kolin 48) An interesting observation when placed aside Elinor Fuchs's observations on *Funnyhouse*. Fuchs compares the work to the mysteriums of early symbolists, an "enclosed, gothic" and eschatological ritual in line with African American ceremonial history where utterance, music, and personae enjoy no strict categorical division (Fuchs 82)

This line of reasoning informed my directorial decision to explore repetition in portions of the text using a model derived from musical form. Lasker's rondo idea was intriguing, but more importantly, it provided a mechanism for playing with form through voice. Curiously, I found a place to explore it through an inconsistency in the text, or to be more precise, in the printing of the text. In the printed text of the version used for this production, the customary character prompt is missing from Sarah's long monologue.<sup>171</sup> One assumes that Sarah begins, "I always dreamed of a day when my mother would smile at me," but the only indication lies in the stage directions:

MAN (PATRICE LUMUMBA) bludgeoned my father's face with the ebony mask.

(The LIGHT remains on him. Before him a BALD HEAD is dropped on a wire, someone screams. Another wall is dropped, larger than the first one was. This One is near the front of the Stage facing thus. Throughout the following monologue, the CHARACTERS: DUCHESS, VICTORIA,

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<sup>170</sup> The rondo is a musical form rooted in Europe's Baroque and Classical musical periods. After establishing the first musical motif, subsequent measures digress through various themes before returning to the original motif. The pattern can be represented as ABACA or ABACABA, or even ABACADA, where "A" represents the principal theme, and B, C, OR D represent subordinate themes. Often the original theme differs slightly upon reoccurrence though it remains a discernible reiteration of its original state. The rondo was also used as an end to larger works, and, as such, tends to be up-tempo and acceleration toward climax and resolution.

<sup>171</sup> Other printings do indicate the speaker. This happy accident was unique to the printing found in *Adrienne Kennedy in One Act*.



JESUS go back and forth. As they go in their backs are to us but the NEGRO faces us, speaking.)

[No Speaker Indicated] I always dreamed of a day when my mother would smile at me... (Kennedy)

The inconsistency prompted a director's note in the corner of my rehearsal script, "who's saying this? Lum or Sarah?" As a result, the experiment began with an exploration of that question, using repetition, jazz, and the rondo as the forms into which text, character, and action would be poured. Sarah would deliver the monologue while Victoria, the Duchess, Jesus, and Lumumba interjected their voices at different times. The idea was to create an aural montage around the soloist [Sarah] using vocal injections to intensify the soundscape, dramatize her madness, and intensify the audience's immersion in that descent.

A series of frequent blackouts interpose the action in *Funnyhouse*, and a function as a rhythmic yardstick for its analysis. The blackouts may further hint at the play's structural blueprint or even suggest what other thinkers have suspected, that the play indeed uses musical form as a paradigm for its dramatic structure. This is, in fact, how we approached the play in production when gauging the arc of the story and scanning the beats of dramatic action. We began by dividing the play into large scenes. The text does not offer traditional markers for scene and act. But the blackouts seemed a logical means of framing each of the major moments of the play. In fact, the play seems to consist of nine clearly demarcated episodes, each shuttered by blackouts. Table 1 shows those divisions.

Table 1 Blackout Schedule and Dictional Arrangement

Scene	Characters	Dictional Form	Motif
1	Victoria & Duchess	Duet	A
2	Sarah; Conrad	Monologues	B
3	Raymond & Duchess	Duet	A
4	Lumumba	Monologues	B
5	Lumumba; Sarah	Monologues	B
6	Jesus & Duchess	Duet	A
7	Jesus & Duchess, Jesus, Conrad	Choral & Monologues	D**
8	ALL	Choral	C
9	Raymond & Conrad	Duet	A

The final column represents an attempt to read the blackout pattern as one reads motifs in musical arrangements. Thus, each of these shuttered scenes can then be read as a motif. As a dramaturgical parallel to characterizing each motif by its musical notes, each shuttered scene is marked by a unique configuration of its dictional form. That is, each section, as Robert Scanlan observes, consists of a different kind of writing: pure writing monologues or traditional theatrical duet scenes. I add a category for what seems to be uniquely choral moments that are neither *écriture* nor dialogue. So where Kennedy constructs stage speech into duets between characters I have noted these moments as **motif A** and into monologues as **motif B**.

Remarkably, the first three scenes fit perfectly into the initial rondo structure ABA or Duet/Monologues/Duet. The first scene features a duet between Victoria and the Duchess. The second consists of two un-entwined monologues by Sarah and Mrs. Conrad, respectively, and the third shuttered scene presents another duet, this time between the Duchess and Funnyman Raymond.

The fourth and fifth scenes<sup>172</sup> are problematic. The fourth scene involves a single monologue by the Lumumba, followed by a blackout. Two distinct monologues then comprise scene five: Lumumba's "generations" speech, and Sarah's retelling of the mission in Africa. Another blackout follows Sarah's monologue. Scene five fits motif B, two monologues, perfectly, but it undermines the rondo rhythm. If grouped with scene four, the two sections might provide a third motif, C, a riff as it were on the monologue motif. Unfortunately, a blackout rests between them, and collapsing the two scenes would "violate" the hypothetical building principle under scrutiny.

Scene six proves more reliable, albeit brief, returning to motif A, the duet arrangement. Scene seven introduces a completely new motif, a choral moment where the Duchess and Jesus speak in unison, followed by two independent monologues by Jesus and Mrs. Conrad. In trying to hold the rondo paradigm in place, scene seven could be labeled as a new motif, D. Scene eight, however, appears to completely derail the paradigm. After an initial line by Jesus, the remaining text of scene eight is entirely choral, with "Patrice Lumumba, the Duchess, Victoria, wandering about speaking at once. Their speeches are mixed and repeated by one another." (20) Written as a monologue for "ALL", it does not fit any of the previous motif patterns. The final scene does return to something familiar through a duet between Raymond and Mrs. Conrad, though it exceeds the rondo form by two "stanzas."

Despite these inconsistencies, we felt that experimenting with the rondo form offered a way to explore musical form as the "answer" to Kennedy's use of repetition. In reviewing the production and its preparatory notes, the most radical experiments with repetition, improvisation, and new vocal arrangements fall in the previously described Queen's Chamber section. Sarah's monologue in the Queen's chamber scene consists of over seven hundred words, though much of the text is the same information, the narrative

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<sup>172</sup> The fourth and fifth scenes consist of the section from the Raymond-Duchess duet (3, motif A) and the Jesus-Duchess duet (6, motif A).

of her grandmother and father in the cabin, repeated. The experiment called for Sarah to speak the entire monologue while the others periodically joined in following an extended rhythm patterned after the rondo structure. In its traditional form, the rondo might use a principle motif and two or three subordinate musical motifs as its building blocks. We tried to develop a dramatic parallel. First, we divided the monologue into seven beats, and assigned each beat to different vocal executions. Specifically, each motif became a *degree of audibility*: the principle theme (A) called for the supporting actors to remain *silent*; the first subordinate theme (B) called for specific *lines* to be *partially voiced*. The alternate subordinate theme (C) called for *lines entirely voiced*. In all, the experiment ran through three different configurations during the rehearsal process.

### **First Iteration**

1. Within the first of the seven beats, Sarah (McDonald) would perform the monologue as a solo performance while the other actors remain motionless and quietly.
2. Within the next beat, the supporting actors would voice one word per line as Sarah speaks.
3. Returning to the original theme, the third beat called for silence from the others.
4. In the fourth beat (C), the choral actor was asked to voice the entire line in unison with Sarah.
5. Beat five returned to the original theme of silence
6. The sixth beat then has the choral actor voice a few words per line, less than half, but most importantly out of sequence.
7. In beat seven, Sarah would complete the monologue as a solo performance while the other actors remain motionless and quietly.

This first iteration proved rather dull. The voices of the other choral actors were too sparse. Given the New Music milieu Kennedy was writing in, the second pass sought to increase the vocal presence of the group and experiment with repetitive differentiation, extending even between iterations of the same motif:

## Second Iteration

1. Sarah performs the monologue as a solo performance while the other actors remain motionless and quietly.
2. The supporting actor's voice one word per line as Sarah speaks.
3. The ensemble returns to the principle theme of soloist and choral silence. But in the tradition of repetition with difference, the choral actor was then to mouth the text as Sarah speaks.
4. The choral actors voice the entire line in unison with Sarah.
5. Beat five returns to the original theme principle theme of soloist and choral silence, with the actors not only mouthing the text as Sarah speaks, but mimicking her gestures and movement as well.
6. The choral actors voice a few words per line out of sequence.
7. A final twist on the stillness theme leaves McDonald ironically silent, and Beck's Lumumba the only speaking voice.

This second arrangement was a terribly convoluted process, and its implementation equally tortuous. Without precise timing, the thing quickly devolved into chaos and frustration. Dictating when to say a word also proved too stiff and inorganic. The actors eventually discovered that approaching their interjection *improvisationally* worked far better both in rehearsal and in performance. Still, the result was less than we had hoped. Most importantly, the arrangement still did not lead to the fervent climax needed at this moment of the dramatic action. Dramaturgically, the monologue is the apex marking Sarah's tragic fall. By the end of the scene, Sarah is on a b-line for suicide. The scene is a battlefield and required the pace and pitch of a violent, mortal struggle. But rather than abandon the experiment completely, we decided to try an even more radical riff on our dramatic-jazz-rondo.

Again each beat was divided into seven spoken lines. The *characters* were then arranged as themes, and each line was reassigned to a single character (Victoria, Duchess,

Jesus, Lumumba), called the accompanist. While the choral idea follows patterns recognized in Black music traditions, we found that in this case, the beats were too long to build to climax. In essence, multiple actors speaking chorally were not dissonant enough; the wall of unified sound was unable to assault the spectator's senses. Instead, we allowed individual voices to rise and swell beneath Sarah. Importantly, those individual voices carried different sonic racial markers, as if the voices within Sarah not only *said* contradictory things, but also were also phonically contentious. In addition, when they were not speaking or intentionally silent, the supporting actors laughed, *crescendo> poco a poco*, gradually increasing the volume of their laughter. Finally, in redressing the arrangement, we kept the monologue divided into seven beats but changed the pattern from the classic rondo progression of ABACABA to AABBBBCA. (See Table 2)

Thus, the new arrangement read as follows:

### **Third Iteration**

1. Sarah performs solo in the first beat while the accompanying characters remain motionless and quietly.
2. Each accompanist mouths a single line of the text as Sarah speaks.
3. Sarah speaks; each accompanist interjects one word on an assigned line.
4. Sarah speaks; an accompanist voices a portion of their assigned line, again independent "notes" out of sequence.
5. Beat five returned to one word interjections per line.
6. The sixth beat then explodes as Sarah falls completely silent; the other characters divvy her lines among themselves, and voice their entire line.
7. We retained the stillness theme for the final beat where Sarah remains silent beneath Beck's Lumumba.

Table 2 Comparative choral arrangements using degree of audibility as motif in rondo thematic patterning

	Original Rondo Arrangement		Second Arrangement		Third Arrangement	
Beat 1	A	Chorus silent, solo Sarah	A	Chorus silent, solo Sarah	A	Chorus silent, solo Sarah
Beat 2	B	Chorus voices one word per line	B	Chorus voices one word per line	A <sup>1</sup>	Successive accompanists mouth the text
Beat 3	A	Chorus silent, solo Sarah	A <sup>1</sup>	Chorus silent, mouthing the text	B	Successive accompanists voice one word per line
Beat 4	C	Chorus voices the entire line	C	Chorus voices the entire line	B <sup>1</sup>	Successive accompanists voice words out of sequence.
Beat 5	A	Chorus silent, solo Sarah	A <sup>2</sup>	Chorus silent, mouthing the text, mimicking gesture	B	Successive accompanists voice one word per line
Beat 6	B	Voice a few words per line out of sequence.	B <sup>1</sup>	Voice a few words per line out of sequence.	C	Successive accompanists, Sarah silent
Beat 7	A <sup>3</sup>	Chorus silent, solo Sarah	A <sup>3</sup>	Silence, solo Lumumba	A <sup>3</sup>	Chorus and Sarah silence, solo Lumumba

So we did all of that work only to discover that the rondo was probably not the answer to Kennedy's repetition. While it seemed promising across the first couple of scenes, from my analysis, it is imprecise to describe *Funnyhouse* as a *strict* dramatic imitation of the rondo. To be sure, neither in her autobiography nor in any extant interviews does Kennedy herself identify the rondo as model for the play. That said, as Lasker observed, there exist remarkable similarities, despite the deviations. The play's

scenic shifts from duet to monologue to the choral ode seem a purposeful pattern of reoccurring motifs. If not a *strict* dramatic imitation of the rondo, there appears to be at least a rather formulaic pattern at work within the structure of the play.

In changing the pattern, the production diverges from the rondo as a model for vocal arrangement. But while the scene does not implement the traditional rondo structure, it does begin with it, and the resulting structure bears some of its features, sort of like the way a child, uniquely visage has one of its parent's eyes and the other parent's nose.

This experiment while not expressly focused on the material sound of the voice and its perceived racial qualities seems to test the applicable range for a theory of sonic miscegenation in framing the play's dramaturgical structure through culturally specific traditions of sound. Linda Kintz puts forward the idea that *Funnyhouse* is a culture mix at its structural level, interweaving a Eurocentric post-structuralism and Afrocentric dramatic forms.

In a politically poetic way Kennedy's notion of dramatic form brings together two traditions: Eurocentric post-structuralism, which foregrounds the implications of interpreting formal textual and dramatic features through the influence of Jakobson, Lacanian connections between language and subjectivity, and Freud's description of dreamwork; and Afrocentric dramatic form that depends on context and on arrangements of meaning according to circularity, contiguity, and layering." (Kintz 153-54)

Deborah Thomson echoes the idea, describing how the play itself is an exercise in "aesthetic miscegenation," blending styles and theatrical elements into a cohesive, post modern whole:

Funnyhouse itself exhibits a mixed ancestry of European, North American, African, and African-American forms and styles. The characters come from myths of European (particularly British) colonialism (Queen Victoria Regina, the Duchess of Hapsburg), Christianity (Jesus), U.S... Antebellum, gothic, and Ghanaian [sic] figures the Man/Patrice Lumumba). Even the play's "plot," or plotlessness, reflects Western European surrealism, modernist dismay at mythic discontinuities,



postmodern ontological mazes, absurdist non-sequitors, African-American gospel tradition, and African chants and masks. (The ebony masks, indeed, may allude both to African traditions and to Picasso's modernist borrowings of African traditions." (D. Thompson, *Blackface* 14-15)

Through the process, the ensemble uncovered something new that proved theatrically viable. Interestingly, the resulting mix sounds closer to hip hop than it does to either jazz or classical music. Voice gets doubled, trebled, or even quadrupled. The leading voice is sporadically underlined by other voices. At times it sounds like an MC backed by a hype (wo)man, forceful, urgent, yet poetically graceful. The theatrical moment grew from a play with the rondo, and from a curiosity about the potential for repetition, an experimental inclination, and a preference for improvisational work—impulses derived of a jazz aesthetic. In a sense, it was a mixed baby, a product of two different sonic traditions, and a theatrically beautiful one.

## Conclusion

Deborah Thompson suggests that by staging characters who exhibit race through the inversion of blackface make-up, Kennedy's undermines the "fundamental social, philosophical, and ontological questions about what "race" "is." (16) These physical production elements accentuate the play's metaphorical masking of racial identity. In other words, the actors' play with physical masks accompanies a play with "*characters-as-masks*," and eventually with race-as-mask.<sup>173</sup> As Sarah tells us, there are multiple versions of herself present on stage. The masks worn by Sarah's metonymic selves reveal her to be refracted through five bodies of shifting, multiple racial identities. Each

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<sup>173</sup> Thompson observes: "Both the ebony mask of Patrice Lumumba and the white masks (behind which "wild kinky hair" flares) of the Queen and Duchess dramatize both the irrelevance and ungroundedness of racial identity to the body and the predominance and inescapability of one's race." (D. Thompson, *Blackface* 34)

is a racially self identifying persona who uses masks *and* the speech of other characters with a fluidity that "encourages (and frustrates) identifications across race." (34)

But unlike other playwrights who seek to repurpose minstrelsy, Kennedy does not simply invert black and white.<sup>174</sup> Instead, her dramatic focus falls on the character of mixed ancestry, the place where taxonomy breaks down. For Kennedy, the racial *mélange*, or more appropriately, the product of said intermingling undermines race as a "a stable and continuous referent" (Diamond 90)

Yet while Kennedy signifies on racial categories as "*locate-able identities*," she also acknowledges the persistence of categorization, and its affect on relationships and power within the United States. Raymond and Conrad have the final say in the play, and their versions of the narrative, like the odes of Greek tragedy, mediate between Sarah (and her characters) and the audience. In addition, Sarah remains *a Negro*, following the miscegenative tradition. Biology may suggest an intermingling of multiple genetic markers, but social constructions within the United States allowed one to check only one box in 1964. In legal forums and social regard, the mixed race individual has overwhelmingly been read as Black throughout American history.

This one-drop reductivism lies at the heart of Sarah's dilemma, and girds all monolithic understandings of Blackness. Sarah cannot conceive of her own qualities—physiological, phonic, or philosophical, as alternative forms of Blackness. She cannot come to grips with the idea that her aspirations have a place within *The Black Experiences*. For Sarah, kinky Negro hair and wanting to be the queen of England seem immiscible, and cannot exist for her as a remarkably Black experience. But why not?

The fluidity that Kennedy (and I hope this production) asserts between our voices, our masks, and our biology, tests the fixity of consciousness to phenotype. Kennedy

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<sup>174</sup> Consider Jean Genet's *Les Negres* (1958) and Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence* (196 ) or contemporary versions such as the Waylons Brothers film *White Chicks* (2004) and Eddie Murphy's Saturday Night Live skit "White Like Me" (December 15, 1984).

warns the listener about the catastrophic possibilities in play when identities lay in the creases of socially constructed categories. Does Sarah take her life because she does not accept the Blackness within her, or because the world around her refuses to accept that her sense of being does not conform to expectations about Blackness? Could we say that hers is a Blackness that loves Victoria and wants to eat on White glass table? She does after all find solidarity with others in the desire “not to be:”

As for myself I long to become even a more pallid Negro than I am now; pallid like Negroes on the covers of American Negro magazines; soulless, educated and irreligious. I want to possess no moral value, particularly value as to my being. I want not to be.... For, like all educated Negroes—out of life and death essential—I find it necessary to maintain a stark fortress against recognition of myself. (Kennedy, FHN 6)

Does irreligion, soullessness, or education disqualify her from identifying as Black? It is a strange thing, post Black Arts<sup>175</sup>, to argue that in some cases, Blackness can be the desire not to Black. Some of the criticism leveled at Kennedy’s work in its own time suggested that her plays, according to Michael Kahn, “were considered neurotic and ... not supportive of the Black movement” (Stein 192) But as E. Patrick Johnson notes, Blackness may simply lie in the struggle to define Blackness. (3) Self loathing is certainly an extreme boundary at which to stake out identity, but this idea of “aberrant” conceptions of identity is important to consider. A group may define itself (or be defined) by a set of traits, qualities, beliefs, or behaviors. But what happens when an individual possesses some, but not all of those often arbitrarily contrived markers. Does this disqualify them from the group entirely? To bring it back to voice and sound, Sarah

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<sup>175</sup> The theory of post Blackness attempts to account for African American experiences of the post Civil Rights era in the United States. Attributed to Debra Dickerson’s *The End of Blackness* (1995) and to Thelma Golden, deputy director and chief curator of exhibitions at the Studio Museum in Harlem Thelma Golden, post Blackness was a term used to describe new, emerging artistic and personal philosophies of African Americans in the 1980s and 1990s. Post Blackness does not claim that racial discrimination has evaporated into the stratosphere, but rather than its mechanisms, facades, and dangers have changed. The post Civil Rights generation of African Americans, as Michael Eric Dyson describes in the forward of Touré’s *Who’s Afraid Of Post-Blackness?* (2011), remain “rooted in blackness” but are not “restricted by it” in the way their forbearers were.

may not execute sound according to the observable tendencies of African American English. Would that alone exclude her from the Black community? Amanda LaShaye Strickland's research into the politics of sounding White asks a similar question. In reflecting on her participants responses, she notes:

Certain participants feel that they should be accepted into the Black community regardless of how they sound. There are multiple ways to be Black, and although language does play a significant part in the Black identity and experience, being Black is more than just the way one talks.  
(29)

What we see in *Funnyhouse* is a magnification of the politics of Black identity, the politics of phenotype, and the politics of behavior. Sarah's most intimate sense of self resides with a group of imaginary friends fashioned after four historical figures. The people in her head confirm her self-loathing. Outside of the crypt-that-is-her-apartment, they even provide personalities through which she can interact with the real world. But Sarah is entrenched. She has succumbed to the psycho-affective pressures which Frantz Fanon places at the core of the imperial enterprise, the capacity to make the colonized complicit in their own oppression. She has heard the cry "Look, a negro!" She has digested it, and finds her *negressity* appalling. Sarah erects a "stark fortress against recognition" of any Blackness within her. Importantly, the Blackness Sarah seeks to escape is inescapable. Kennedy constructs it in a number of ways, through Sarah's "kinky Negro hair," through her father at the door, and through visions of Africa. It is a part of her existence, and it is recurring. Its persistence and intrinsic nature peg her struggle against it as ultimately futile and all the more tragic.

In reviewing the production, I find that, with an ear tuned toward it, one can hear this tragic dilemma woven into the actors' vocal performances. Voice functions both as mask, and as what art historian Jean Laude finds in West African masking traditions, an "exteriorization of consciousness." And it does so in a means technically simpler than anything costume, makeup, or props might have accomplished. (Laude 98) Feliz McDonald's kalediophonic Sarah is a woman struggling against the "barriers to

wholeness and psychic balance” posed by her multiple sites of identity. (L. A. Brown 86) Lumumba’s play with voice is a strategic exercise in code switching. Mrs. Conrad straddles the expanse; at one moment she indulges in bigoted caricature, and in the next instant, she becomes the puppet of an ancient, mystical Blackness.

Equally, vocal sound addresses some of the formulaic concern over the cyclical nature of the text. In each case, worrying the assumptions about Blackness and its sonic forms plays a significant role in characterization and in building the dramatic action in this production. Couching Sarah’s psychological distress in terms of vocal sound suggests the potential of vocality as a critical device for interrogating racial constructs. This is the essence of sonic miscegenation. It posits that the tendency for people to identify or be identified through vocal characteristics, linguistic profiling if you will, can be used to strategically undermine assumptions of undifferentiated Blackness(es) in performance. Again, as a device in the Black performance Studies tool box, sonic miscegenation theory challenges the idea of race as essence, and posits race as existential, using performance to question the equation of biology, phenotype, and even behavior (as in the case of vocal sound) to race.

## CHAPTER 6, THE POLITICS OF SOUND

### The Case Studies

#### AUGUST WILSON'S *THE PIANO LESSON*

In addressing some of the phonological qualities of these two performances, my goal has been to pinpoint with more accuracy how voice, foregrounded in performance, resonates with ideas about racial formation. *Hearing* Blackness in a voice may invoke a *corporeal* Blackness in the imagination; (that is, it may assume a Black body as the source of Black sound, and in so doing, evoke assumptions tied to Blackness as a marker of character. In addition, *hearing* Blackness as a vocal manifestation may alternately call upon other sonic traditions associated with Black experiences. Blackness as a vocal marker can interweave assumptions of body and culture with themes of the dramatic material itself. Furthermore, by placing the ear horn to *The Piano Lesson* and *Funnyhouse of a Negro* I was able to hear some of the ways that vocal sound draws all sound to the foreground. The soundscapes which sonic critical theory helps to crackle and hiss into clarity resound with larger themes of cultural production and identity.

Within the body of critical works on August Wilson, theorists such as Harry Elam Jr., Sandra Shannon, and Paul Carter Harrison find a Blues Poetic in Wilson's character construction, themes, dramatic structure, and plots. But I wanted to listen for the blues in the sounds the actors made through what I call prosodic modeling.

As linguists Lisa Green, John Rickford, and Geneva Smitherman have observed, sounding Black (in addition to lexical and grammatical features) often erupts in the intonational and stress patterns of an individual's speech—in the music of speech. The investigative question behind this case study asks whether the "music" of August Wilson's African American characters corresponded to features observed in other African American expressions in sound. Here I sought to examine the prosodic contours of actors through a set of musical criteria derived from Olly Wilson's and Portia Maultsby's

conceptual frameworks of Black music.<sup>176</sup> Would I find musical (blues, specifically) figurations in the contours of an actor's delivery?

A close read and phonological analysis suggests that the vocal performances in this production of *The Piano Lesson* varied in their adherence to the O. Wilson/ Maultsby framework. I did find *implied metrical contrast* in Avery's "Who Shall I Send" monologue; *ornamentation & embellishment* in Berniece's lamentations over her husband, and *juxtaposed pitch ranges* in Wining Boy's singing and speaking voices, for example. At the same time, many of the O. Wilson/ Maultsby criteria do not embed as prosodic elements within an individual actor's speech pattern as my original hypothesis suggested. One of the key principles both Maultsby and Wilson find in many black musical traditions is the practice of "vocal injection used to intensify musical expression." Interestingly, the two dramatic cases at the center of my study reveal an inverse of this principle. In other words, I found musical and non-vocal sounds included in the performance in ways that intensify the spoken text and support August Wilson's project of elevating African American history. Most of the criteria derived from the O. Wilson/ Maultsby model of conceptual framework presented themselves within *The Piano Lesson* production through organic eruptions of music, dramatic structure, or thematic concerns. Wilson and Richards inject musical and sonic elements into the performance. During moments of group expression, like the "Berta Berta" interlude, these elaborations in the soundscape seem to align the drama with Black musical traditions and with African American cultural identity.

While the direct translation of musical idioms into intonation contours and rhythmic patterns proved interesting, I gain the most insight from the way the analysis focused my attention on the specificity of the dialect being spoken. As a period piece,

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<sup>176</sup> See Table 5 Prosodic Criteria for *The Piano Lesson* derived from Olly Wilson & Portia Maultsby's Conceptual Frameworks of Black Musical Traditions. See Chapter 1 for a discussion of Prosodic criteria derived from Olly Wilson (1999) & Portia Maultsby's (1990) conceptual frameworks of Black musical traditions.

*The Piano Lesson* requires actors to create character on a number of different levels, but language seems to figure prominently in the actor's toolbox. Linguistic data on AAE's phonological diversity allowed the actors to recreate mid-century, Afro-Mississippian, or Mississippi Delta African American English (Delta-AAE).<sup>177</sup> Delta AAE is a challenging dialect study even for African American actors familiar with this sound. It remains challenging, in part, because actors are often trained away from its regionally specific markers.<sup>178</sup>

But Delta-AAE also remains understudied, often lumped in with other African American dialects in the same way all Blacknesses are often undifferentiated. In performance, one can hear the depth (and dearth) of dialect study at work, particularly when Wilson extends natural dialogue into poetic monologue and calls on actors to deploy a stylized use of African American English that must nevertheless remain "natural." The diversity of African American English speech continues to be untouched by most actor training programs. While instruction in scansion and Shakespearean diction, in Received Pronunciation and Standard American accents continue to be essential courses in most acting programs<sup>179</sup>, training in jazz aesthetics, hip-hop and

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<sup>177</sup> While the play is set in Pittsburgh, all of its players are from northern Mississippi.

<sup>178</sup> The diphthongization of medial rhotic sounds, for example, is a particularly telling marker.

<sup>179</sup> Several of the major universities in Texas offering degrees in acting, for instance, require courses in styles. At the University of Texas (Austin), St Edward's University, Texas Tech University, Texas State University, Southern Methodist University, and Baylor University, these courses, most often an upper division course in the acting sequence, focus on the performance of Shakespearean and "Classical" (Greek or Roman) texts. The premier conservatory programs such as Julliard, American Musical & Dramatic Academy, American Academy of Dramatic Arts, and the Actor's Conservatory maintain a similar diet of the classical Western canon in spoken performance training. Interestingly, Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas does offer a course in poetic language. The course catalogue describes it as a "study and practice of acting techniques using texts with poetic language through research, analysis work and performance. Study includes character and scene analysis and the performance of scenes and audition material from a variety of theatrical periods." (Southwestern University 191) Such a broad heading could encompass the study of playwrights such as Kennedy and Wilson alongside other versed writers like Shakespeare and Sophocles. I imagine that such a pairing of diverse poetic texts would only serve to enhance the training of young actors and broaden the scope of their performance capabilities.



spoken word oral performance, storytelling, sermonic formulation, and the array of Black dialects remain esoteric for all performers regardless of ethnicity. It begs the question, how can we as teachers of performance expand our preparation of students for contemporary verse and Wilsonesque texts that utilize the sound of language itself as an instrument.

Again, to my ear, these specific phonological gestures are key in shaping Wilson's stylized naturalism. Wilson's "versioning" of Delta AAE helps to establish the play's historical verisimilitude while remaining focused on Wilson's larger goal: the elevation of African American history (through music, the presence of the spiritual and the supernatural, and blues-like story arcs), and a simultaneous poetic "upliftment" of Delta AAE itself. Ultimately, the execution of Wilson's language by the actors paves the way for its poeticization. Insofar as *Piano Lesson* is about the valuation of an instrument (the piano) co-opted to generate Black sound, it is, from a production standpoint, also about co-opting the American stage for the reproduction of Black sound. As Bearden heightened everyday scenes from Black life into more than documents-of-the-quotidian, Wilson similarly "uplifts" Delta AAE through word choice, phrasing, and a careful structural arrangement of his dialogue and speeches. The actors then execute Wilson's poetry with a regional specificity, reinforcing an authenticity based on the sound's proximity to actual speakers of the dialect.

Wilson finds the blues, as music and as dramaturgical guidepost, nestled in the crook of fact and poetry. The blues not only pervade Wilson's themes, but also weave themselves in his dramaturgical structure and into the double descriptives, metaphorical constructions, and linguistic adornments of his characters speeches. By crafting dialogue that resembles the lyrics and ethos of blues music, Wilson connects language and voice to a larger soundscape of Black experiences in the United States. Wilson's politics frame these sonic maneuvers to honor his ancestors and to affirm his understanding of

Blackness. He does so using specific sonic elements supplied through voice to affirm his art as Black art, and a conception of an “authentic” Blackness as an identity shaped by the blues tradition.

### **ADRIENNE KENNEDY’S FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO**

In an article about the Fisk Jubilee singers, Marti Newland describes a “mixed approach to timbre” found in the choir’s performances, both past and present. This mixed approach to timbre (a movement between *bel canto* and straight tone<sup>180</sup>) is coupled with a similar medley of diction (improvisational movement across the lyrics between dialect and Standard English). Newland frames the Fiskites’ use of and departure from Standard American English as stylization choices in conversation with the long standing “politics of respectability.” She writes:

The articulation of both [t] and [d] stylize this performance by the Singers and shows how their diction communicates, in addition to the text clarity, an effort for recognition as representatives of Fisk’s tradition of excellence. While the singers perform properness in the beginning of the refrain through their diction of the words “great day,” we find an example of the ensemble’s varying adherence to AAVE<sup>181</sup> by the end of the refrain. The text of the final line reads “God’s going to build up Zion’s walls.” The ensemble, throughout the soloists’ singing of the verses, repeats this same text. Consistent throughout the piece is their singing of “gonna” instead of “going to.” The singers articulate the final consonant [d] in “build” with less consistency. Some repetitions are sung “God’s gonna build up Zion’s walls” and some repetitions are sung “God’s gonna buil’ up Zion’s walls.” Through the Singers’ attention to AAVE, General English, and a heterogeneous vocal timbre, they find possibilities to

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<sup>180</sup> Newland explains the distinction between *bel canto* and straight tone: “My use of *bel canto* (Italian for “beautiful singing”) refers to classical or opera style singing in which an ideal vocal timbre demonstrates consistent vibrato, vowel definition and resonance in all vocal registers. In contrast, straight-tone singing refers to a vocal sound with no vibrato, achieved by a singer’s application of air-flow that constricts oscillation of the vocal chords.” (14)

<sup>181</sup> AAVE is African American Vernacular English, a term used by some linguists to describe Black speech. Throughout this project I have used the term African American English following Lisa Green’s nomenclature, and asserting that AAE represents a comprehensive systematic linguistic system.

manage their individual vocal expressions among the hegemonic realms of the university administration's goals for student excellence and dominant U.S. racial ideology. (14)

Within the concert spiritual tradition, vocal choices became an important site of Black subjectivity. Play with sound occupied political as well as aesthetic space.

I return again to a discussion of choices. My investigation of *Funnyhouse of a Negro* represents an attempt to articulate a theory of sonic miscegenation for what Newland identifies with the Fisk singers. Such a theory allows for the critical consideration of how performers mix already racialized vocal sound cues in strategic ways. The Fisk singers, like other concert spiritualists, erupt from a tradition dating back to the 1820s which sought to undermine the equation of Blackness with the image/echo of blackface minstrelsy. In this, it is a tradition dedicated to the expansion of African American identity. Granted, this impulse to change the African American image did not afford the blackface image/echo much space at the New Negro table at all; proponents of the concert spiritual, folk dramas, and Black classicism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were not seeking to embrace blackface as a variety of Blackness. But these responses to the blackface image/echo do reveal an urge to variegate Blackness and broaden its reach.

The impulse to change the monolith which blackface came to represent marks an important intellectual track. The theory presented through this study expands on that principle of change by suggesting theatrical, voice-based subversions of an essentialized Blackness. It offers race as a trope that can be inverted sonically, framed as a performance aesthetic, and one that provides additional argument with which to test the very idea of "authenticity." Whereas the Black sonicity at play with Wilson's work *knows* there is a sound that is authentically Black because it connects with other sonic practices found in Diasporic communities, sonic miscegenation asks *what if that same sound comes from a different racial body?* Does that undermine the idea of "authenticity" and racial categories? Does it, in some way, invalidate the speaker, the text, or the performance? What are the consequences of this mix?

Within the narrative sphere of *Funnyhouse*, the effort to disenfranchise that which does not fit in the racial box produces madness, death, and nightmare. Kennedy does not make explicit mention of how the actors playing her characters should sound. But my reading of the play (from its stage directions, its construction of character, and the patchwork nature of its narrative structure), and of the stylistic inclinations spreading across Kennedy's *oeuvre*, show a pattern of resistance to fixity and a fascination with blurry things.

Importantly, when listening to *Funnyhouse* I leaned on many of the same racialized sound markers used to analyze *The Piano Lesson*. Yet rather than creating a sense of verisimilitude toward the acceptance of characters as "realistic," the presence or absence of these markers became buoys charting a psychic expanse of internalized racial identities— identities that exist in a single mind and a single body. Internally, Sarah is multiple. Perhaps we all are.<sup>182</sup> But Sarah also externalizes as multiples. In this production, voice, accent, and diction evolved as vehicles for expressing the array of her selfhood.

To be clear, I do not hear Sarah code switching in a way familiar to those of us who speak multiple dialects. Rather, there is a careful psychic balance at play within Sarah that is exacerbated by a life time of personal trauma (mother's insanity and father's suicide/murder) and complicated by a legacy of social oppressions (based on gender and race. With all of this at play, it is easy to find Sarah's apparent imbalance as the dramatic problem of the play. Lorraine Brown suggests the action revolves around the "barriers to wholeness and psychic balance posed by her Sarah's multiple sites of identity: her Blackness, her femaleness, and her class. (86)

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<sup>182</sup> Multiplicity in our identities goes beyond racial multiplicity. Without delving too deeply into the clinical aspects of personality, each person plays many roles in life. It is a function of human social interaction that we alter our exteriorization depending on social context. But by altering ourselves too often or too severely, we can lose sense of our individual identity. Yet without that ability to alter ourselves to the social context, as seen for instance with many autistic children, social interaction may become difficult.

Sarah's condition is imbalanced and unhealthy because in the end it leads her to hurt herself. But I am not sure that every case of a multiplicity of identities (that is, a fluidity between the various roles we play, as opposed to multiple identities as a disorder) will become unhealthy. Nor am I certain, given her Poetics of Intermediacy, that Kennedy is critiquing the presence of multiple identities as much as she is dramatizing the effect of a world that discounts our multiple (often contrary) sites of identification as mad, transgressive, dangerous, and necessarily prohibited. Perhaps, as with the furor in American history over miscegenation, the problem lies less with the multiplicity within Sarah, but rather with the society she inhabits. Kennedy challenges this social order, one which not only "insists on the binary identities of black or white, male or female," but one that is specifically anti-Black and anti-female. (D. Thompson, Fiction 68).

After all, what we might label as madness, the exteriorization of her inner multiplicity without regard for social constructs, may in fact represent a process of transformation. Rosemary Curb offers an alternate reading of multiplicity in *Funnyhouse* through a lens of Feminine Aesthetics.<sup>183</sup> Rather than a function of insanity, Curb suggests that Sarah's "*simultaneity of consciousness*," may reflect a psychic response to the sociopolitical realities of gender:

Woman-conscious theatre presents a multi-dimensional unraveling of women's collective imagination in a psychic replay of myth and history. All time is present to it. It emphasizes sociopolitical realities rather than the dilemmas of individual characters, transformations of characters and fragmented personalities illustrate women's multiple reflections. It is polymorphous and anti-hierarchical, if not downright anarchistic and iconoclastic." (Curb, Re/cognition, Re/presentation, Re/creation in

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<sup>183</sup> In an informal panel on "Feminine Aesthetics," Kay Gardner described the significant difference in symphonic musical compositions by women similarly.

"Whereas male composers often lead toward a final crescendo (comparable to the male orgasm), women's music flows from a center outward with rippling repetitions of motives toward the conclusion (multi-orgasmically), Kennedy's central images (skulls, owls, vials of blood) convey not the lustrous vitality of the blooming flower or ripening fruit but the perversion of vital female powers." (Gardner qtd. in Curb, *Fragmented* 186)

'Woman-Conscious" Drama: The Seer, the Seen, the Scene, Obscene 303)

Curb's discourse with philosopher Julia Kristeva, whose work also intersects language, voice, and the politics of identity, cites a "cyclic reflexivity" in visual representations of women's experience. Curb's observation invites a consideration of aural plurality which similarly refuses a linear, irreducible frame for identity. Such an aesthetic of aural "cyclic reflexivity" emerged during the 1960's at the beginning of Kennedy's career in pursuit of a dramaturgy of "simultaneous truths." These truths clash, crash, and contradict, but they remain irreducible strata of the self. Theatrically the voice, in a properly tuned acoustical setting, can easily offer characters a ubiquity and multiple presences. When amplified by multiple performers, the cipher becomes a presence that is both one and many at the same time. Not only does character become irreducible, so too do the identities being represented.

### **Authenticity**

The sonic approach of this production of *Funnyhouse* works theatrically, in part, because *Funnyhouse* is not a realistic play. Not hearing what one might expect—"Black" sound from Black bodies—aligns thematically with the dramatic material Kennedy has composed. But would sonic miscegenation as a critical listening tool provide insight into dramatic texts constructed without multiple, fragmentary, unexpected vocalizations in mind? For example, would a similar interpretation work on pieces rooted in American realism, or even in the stylized naturalism of a play like *The Piano Lesson*?<sup>184</sup> What does it mean if, within a production of *The Piano Lesson*, an African American actor delivers

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<sup>184</sup> Hollywood films are populated with White British and Australian actors cast as American characters through the use of Standard American diction (Hugh Laurie, Sam Worthington, Nicole Kidman, Hugh Jackman, Gary Oldman, or Anna Torv). A few Afro-British performers have also joined the trend. Idris Elba, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Thandie Newton, and Lennie James are Black British actors who have been cast as American characters. Would critics find their characterizations inauthentic were they to use their habitual sounds?

the text in General American, Valspeak, or RP— *does it become farce? Does it play out as a mediocre performance by actors who have not prepared themselves through proper dialect study? Does it generate new insight into Valley culture or British society? Is it played to a Black audience? What do the actors look like?*<sup>185</sup>—

A long list of factors influences audience reception with regard to this question of actor sound. At core, these questions boil down to whether or not an audience will suspend its disbelief. If the characters in a period script concerned with the lives of African American characters reproduced a sound not associated with African American culture, would an audience accept it as “*authentic?*”

Angela C. Pao’s “False Accents: Embodied Dialects and the Characterization of Ethnicity and Nationality” addresses vocal authenticity in her discussion of “dubbing,”<sup>186</sup> “full bodied cultural impersonation,”<sup>187</sup> and the evolution of dialect training materials. While modern and postmodern practices have pushed stylistic thresholds beyond the bounds of 19<sup>th</sup> century European realism, Pao asserts that production standards in the U.S. (particularly in television and film) continue to maintain “*a strong reality effect through the reproduction of surface details of different social and historical milieus.*” Even in speculative fiction, the push is often to reproduce “surface details” (details that,

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<sup>185</sup> A few years ago I had a young African American woman in an Acting I course to who picked up one of Berniece’s monologues. When approaching the monologue, she joked about not being able to sound Black enough to execute Berniece’s monologue in an “authentic” or convincing fashion. She and another young woman were the only African American students in the class, but neither of them used AAE within the classroom. Each described themselves as not having grown up around African Americans beyond their immediate families. Surprisingly, she “found” the sound of the text, a phonic scheme rooted in southern AAE, and executed a convincing portrayal.

<sup>186</sup> The producers of the TV series *Kung Fu* (1972) originally wanted “real, authentic” Chinese English dialect voices by non-Chinese actors. The voices were eventually redubbed by the same actors using (even more) less than “real, authentic” accents for the American television show.

<sup>187</sup> The 1991 Broadway production of *Miss Saigon* sparked controversy with the casting of white actors as Vietnamese characters, complete with bronzing make up and eyelid prosthetics prompting playwright David Henry Hwang to file a formal complaint with the ethnic minorities committee of Actors’ Equity.

with new technologies, look increasingly real.) Consequently, Pao observes, for the remaining human element (the actor) physical traits remain a prominent criterion for casting choices. Within American realism, physical traits often provide “standards of authenticity,” even (sometimes especially) when a production seeks to make a statement through non-traditional casting:

In the Western dramatic tradition, a central function of the actor has been not just to create a personage through diction and gesture but to create a sense of time and place as well. An actor’s physical appearance, speech and movement are meant to correspond to those of people who lived in a particular era and location. (355)

Pao goes on to argue that speech and dialect operate as a similar rubric of authenticity. In other words, voice and actor-sound remain important “defining features” of character, and function as “a material signifier of locality,” as communicative as scenery or costumes. (355)

Yet even as dialect functions as a measure of authenticity, dialect instructional materials vary in defining the authenticity of an accent. Pao describes how some early dialect manuals attempted to ground dialect study in imagined cultural factors affecting vocal sound. Sections on characterization, descriptions of mouth position, language carryovers, and cultural psychology were intended to help the actor find psychological and physiological inroads into life-like character. Lewis and Marguerite Shalett Herman’s *Manual of Foreign Dialects for Radio, Stage, and Screen*, for example, asked that students tie dialect study to a parallel study of the “national character of a people” with an understanding that dialects derive from specific historical circumstances and may reflect certain cultural proclivities. At the same time, locating essential national (or racial) traits can also reduce group identities into caricature. At times, the search for the uniqueness of dialect led early instructional tools to perpetuate stereotypical portraits of national characteristics--- Brits as modest and reserved; Germans as meticulous and uptight; Chinese as grinning and industrious; Japanese as bucktoothed and scheming.

Other dialect manuals, such as Evangeline Machlin’s *Speech for the Stage* (1976),



stressed that the actor studying dialect must completely recreate the sound of native speakers for the “knowing ear,” lest the actor “destroy the reality of the character instead of heightening it” (193). Alternate definitions of authenticity play out through these approaches to dialect training and actor sound. On the one hand, authenticity indicates an adherence to unique cultural qualities that filter into the groundwater of speech, suggesting an essence beyond phonology that binds all of its speakers. On the other, it speaks of a purely sonic mimesis accurate enough to fool the “knowing ear.”

Each in its own way points to the stylistic dictates of Western realism; that is, “the accurate, detailed, unembellished depiction of nature or of contemporary life” (Encyclopædia Britannica) and its faith in the sensory observations of external qualities. Theatrical realism’s assertion of objectivity and truth remains fraught with inconsistencies. After all, an audience witnessing a slice of life is not seeing the whole pie. While realism can be seductive, any discerning fan of reality TV knows that realism in performance tends to get condensed and selected as it moves closer to its presentation to an audience.<sup>188</sup>

I wrestle with this stylistic distinction because the notion of objectivity and depictions of human behavior based on observable qualities is central to any discussion of authenticity. Representations of “contemporary life” are particularly relevant to discourses on race and racial formation. Bearden and Wilson observed, recorded, and heightened subjects from African American life. The details, the “material signifier[s] of locality” that they recreate in their art are masterful recreations that magnify those signifiers and connect them to Black communities throughout the United States. (Pao 355) But to suggest these slices represent ***The*** Black Experience risks an exclusion of

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<sup>188</sup> Bertolt Brecht famously told audiences not to stare so romantically at the illusions of reality constructed for “realistic” dramas. While he and Artaud are at times placed at the poles of the modernist revolt in theater, each sought to remind bourgeoisie audiences in Europe and the Americas that the “reality” (which realism sought to bottle for them) existed elsewhere and in more substantial form. For Brecht “reality” was the socio economic state of the theatergoer’s life. For Artaud “reality” was the spiritual health of both actor and spectator.

other Black experiences, and a calcification of the idea of Blackness. Fictional drama, autobiography, and even auto-ethnography all share a limitation in generalizing about a group based on the idiosyncrasies of personal narratives. As D. Soyini Madison notes in her consideration of performance as a critical ethnography, the danger of essentializing a group arises when “the rootedness and embellishments of the self diminish the thickness and complexities of the encompassing terrain.” (322) The assumption that one voice somehow speaks for a diverse social grouping remains on many levels implausible. Read too literally, an assumption of a singular Black experience becomes greasepaint clogging the pores. Blackness, as an aspect of identity, is a living thing that moves, shifts, resists, breathes, grows, and changes.

Moreover, performance, by its nature, is restored behaviors. Against the question of authenticity, things on stage are seldom ever the “real thing;” rather, performance, even with ritual theater, most often involves some sort of surrogation. If one were truly “keeping it real” the underlying pretense of “authenticity” should find little traction on stage. This is not to say there are no truths to be found in performance. But often the best truths in performance derive from metaphor, metonym, and symbol.

But *if* we are to define authenticity as an adherence to the principle of realism, that is, to sensory observations of external qualities, and “*the* accurate, detailed, unembellished depiction of nature or of contemporary life,” one would also need to acknowledge that things like dialect and sociolect are broad generalizations, and that idiolects vary from individual to individual<sup>189</sup>. To say that *a people* sound like X, is a

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<sup>189</sup> The terms idiolect and sociolect refer respectively to individual language use and group or community language use. Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines idiolect as ‘the language or speech pattern of one individual at a particular period of life.’ Sociolect identifies a “social variety of language,” or social dialect existing within the borders of a dominant linguistic system. Linguist Walt Wolfram defines social dialect, as the “the alignment of a set of language structures with the social position of a group in a status hierarchy.” (Wolfram 59) Importantly, Wolfram observes that the identification of sociolect or social dialect is not a simple, objective distinction of language or dialect associated with a particular social group. Rather, the concept of social dialect involves an implication of power and status, and as Wolfram writes, “when language differences represent groups that are unequal in their power relations, it is quite common for society at large to interpret the differences in terms of the principle of

tremendous departure from the ideal of realism, and undermines any claim of authenticity.<sup>190</sup> Extending an individual sound as representative of a whole is, when scrutinized, simply inaccurate. Such are the limits of realism.

Yet some thinkers do depart from the ideal of realism to find other standards by which to measure of authenticity. I am reminded of bell hook's reflections on the way African American performance can function as a "critical ethnography," which, like a pantograph, outlines the larger culture as it traces the details of an individual subject. (hooks, *Performance* 213) In a similar way, activist and scholar Chinosole<sup>191</sup> articulates a concept of matrilineal Diaspora which understands portraits of the individual by some Black artists as couched in generational continuums with extensive representational reach. (187) <sup>192</sup> Similar to what Sandra Shannon observes in August Wilson's "tendency to privilege memory over history in his work," Diasporic conceptions of selfhood blur the

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linguistic inferiority. According to this principle, the speech of a socially subordinate group will be interpreted as linguistically inadequate by comparison with that of the socially dominant group. (Wolfram 59)

<sup>190</sup> Individual portraits are of course different particularly where an accurate sound record exists. Anna Deveare Smith, for example with "On the Road: A Search for American Character," often performs extensive personal interviews as she creates a range of characters. Or consider how Don Cheadle's recreation of Paul Rusesabagina in *Hotel Rwanda* benefited from the real Rusesabagina's presence as a consultant and source.

<sup>191</sup> In *The African Diaspora & Autobiographics, an Examination of African, West Indian, and African American Autobiographies* (New York: P. Lang, 2001) Chinosole develops the theory of *matrilineal Diaspora* through her reading of poet Audre Lorde's autobiographical work *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982). She argues that Lorde's text employs tropes evident across 19th and 20th century Black autobiographies: subjectivity grounded in lineage, displacement from the home, affirmations of difference, matrifocality, and the use of spiritual histories during self definition.

<sup>192</sup> Matrifocality, for instance, centers subjectivity on maternal relationships. Lorde explores this temporally dynamic sense of self in the Prologue of her novel *Zami, a New Spelling of My Name*, writing:

I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child with the 'I' at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the I moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed. (Prologue)

The self, as conceived in matrilineal Diasporic autobiographies, resists fixity, and instead circulates among these three centers of being.

distinctions between personal narrative, public history, and fiction. (150) Departing from the aesthetic rules of realism, memory here serves as a referent which validates personal narratives not as unique experiences, but as the shared experiences of myth, genealogy, and “practical formulas of daily living.” (Roach 11) Myth and legend exist not as fantasy, but as a “collective memory” by which one knows and communicates with the past. They provide models for understanding personal and collective narratives as epistemologically-sound histories.

I touch on this to offer an additional wavelength on the idea of authenticity. Where it may be argued that communicating the uniqueness of an individual’s experience serves as a measure of authenticity, a Diasporic theory of subjectivity grounded in lineage and spiritual histories offers a strategy of authentication based on a narrative’s resonance with a body of shared experience contained in myth, legend, and oral wisdoms.<sup>193</sup> As an aesthetic approach, this connection to others and to the past allows the individual subject within a piece of art to become larger than the immediate subject “body”, to metonymically represent a people, and to make present larger social identifications. Certainly Wilson does not succeed in representing the entirety of African American culture. But the body of his work carries a patrilineal complement of the markers Chinosole notes as hallmarks of a matrilineal Diasporic approach.

## **Goals of the Study**

In mechanical engineering, the theory of sonicity denotes the science of transmitting mechanical energy through vibrations. Inspired by musical theory,

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<sup>193</sup> In her analysis, Chinosole suggests that this ontological perspective evolved in response to the psychological and social destruction occasioned by the Diaspora. The expansion of one’s sense of self to encompass the collective was an important political and psychological tactic for a people “in the face of an oppressive culture bent on your obliteration.” (138) The dislocation of peoples from West Africa and the disruption of their institutions necessitated new resilient conceptions of the self. Central to both its analytical and psycho-social capacity is its emphasis on “survival through adaptation or cultural improvisation.” (138)

Romanian inventor George Constantinescu (1881-1965) found that the kind of oscillations produced by sound could be used to transfer mechanical energy in continuous environments (liquid or solid) due to the elasticity of the medium. The principles of sonicity led to the development of a number of inventions in mining and transportation. Constantinescu's most successful creation was the Constantinescu synchronization gear. The CC gear was a hydraulic machine-gun synchronizer, otherwise known as an interrupter gear. It allowed mounted-guns on British propellered aircraft during World War I to shoot between the spinning blades of the propeller.<sup>194</sup>

In Black sonicity, I thought I might have coined something exclusive, so my discovery of Constantinescu was bitter sweet. I had not invented an entirely new term, and I shared it with technologies of war. But finding a lexical link and an extra-disciplinary site where sound functions as a motive, generative force was encouraging. And I take some solace in the attempt to re-purpose a term to do more than wage war or fracture the earth.

In a recent issue of *American Quarterly* devoted to sound studies, editors Josh Kun and Kara Keeling asked important questions about the role sound plays in cultural analysis, particularly in examining “empire, immigration, and national culture,” and in “American formations of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, community, and class,” (446). Kun and Keeling note that American society has always been informed by the “political economies of sound” and that until recently, the sonic aspects of our collective history have been under examined. As Alexander Weheliye argued that early recording practices changed the way people could imagine themselves and create communities

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<sup>194</sup>Among his other inventions, Constantinescu developed a sonic engine for early automobiles, a wave transmission rock drill, a silent gun, a sonic sound generator for signaling and communication, a sonic fuel injection system for Diesel engines, a sonic torque Converter for ship propulsion, and even a small two seater automobile, The Constantinesco, manufactured in Britain and France from 1926 to 1928. See Ian McNeil, “George Constantinescu, 1881–1965 and the Development of Sonic Power Transmission.” *The International Journal for the History of Engineering and Technology*, Vol. 54 (London: The Newcomen Society, 1983.)

across time and space, twenty first century audio technologies have created new spaces for deeper examinations of sound.<sup>195</sup> And our age has a century of audio records from which to gain new sonic hindsight.

With regard to performance studies, there has always been a push against the ocular-centrism of other social (psychology, literature and history, for example) and applied sciences (physics and biology). Performance studies inherits a strong tradition of audio-anthropological scholarship from the work of James Clifford, Viet Erlmann, R. Murray Schafer, Zora Neale Hurston, and Steven Feld. These scholars used technologies to investigate sound, but more importantly, each fore-grounded sound as an important place to conduct scholarship. Schafer, for instance, advocates the investigation of sonic environments, “the enculturated nature of sound” and the “material spaces of performance and ceremony that are used or constructed for the purpose of propagating sound.” (25) Similarly, feminist film and performance theorists such as Britta Sjogren, Kaja Silverman, and bell hooks<sup>196</sup> center sound in their analytical processes, and frame the voice as a key mechanism of gendered subjectivity.

Amid its disciplinary kin, the theater— from Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty to Beckett’s *Not I* (1972), from the Dadaist’s chance poems to Black Arts vocal theory—has been a constant home to the insight offered by the uttered word and the human voice. Moreover, its complexity of means allows theater to continue as a site for the old ways of sound, while simultaneously embracing 21<sup>st</sup> century avenues for centering sound in its

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<sup>195</sup> Jonathan Sterne in his study, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham : Duke University Press, 2003) calls the period from 1750–1925 the “Ensoniment,” a sound based concurrence to the Age of Enlightenment.

<sup>196</sup> For discussions of voice in feminist film and performance theory, see Britta Sjogren, *Into the Vortex: Female Voice and Paradox in Film*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Indiana University Press, 1988); and bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators.” (*The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. Amelia Jones, ed. London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 94–105.)

practices.<sup>197</sup>

In addition, race and ethnicity have occupied high ground in the literature of sonic studies.<sup>198</sup> Perhaps the frequency of the aural filter stems from trends in historical studies focused on the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps sound studies resonate with cultural studies communities in the US because music remains central to American cultural studies, and it is difficult to discuss American music without involving race and ethnicity. In addition to works already cited in this study, an array of works treat the connection between Black music and Black identity. Many fall within the field of musicology. But several align more closely with American studies, African American studies, or history. For example, while not an exclusively musical treatise, Fred Moten's also *In the Break* (2003) theorizes the way in which sound, voice, and music operate as weapons of Black resistance and liberation. Paul Gilroy's chapter "'Jewels Brought from Bondage': Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity" in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) discusses how Black artists and intellectuals have wrestled with the ideas of identity, modernity, and authenticity through music.<sup>199</sup> For Keeling, Kun, and their contributors, sound functions as both a subject and as an analytical tool. Keeling notes:

Indeed, as these studies highlight, sound has been a privileged epistemological and ethical mode through which black existence in the United States has been conceptualized, theorized, politicized, and constituted as an object of scholarly investigation. Given the significance of sound to knowledge produced from and about African American history and culture, it is not surprising to us that a significant number of the essays

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<sup>197</sup> I had the privilege of seeing *A Huey P Newton Story*, a one man show starring Roger Guenveur Smith, way back in 1996 at the Woolly Mammoth Theater in Washington DC. Throughout the show Smith and DJ Marc Anthony Thompson, his unseen 'Comrade', periodically improvised dialogue back in forth. Sometimes Thompson spoke, but in other moments, he would "respond" through record scratches and samples or music of recorded speeches.

<sup>198</sup> Ten of the seventeen articles Keeling and Kun included in *American Quarterly's* issue on sound, for instance, address race and ethnicity through sound.

we received in response to our call for papers focused on aspects of African American existence in some way. The essays in this volume that make African American history, lives, and culture a central concern highlight the ways that a scholarly attention to sound can variously challenge, redirect, or reaffirm our understandings about many of the issues and concerns central to scholarship in American studies. (456)

This premise—“the significance of sound to knowledge produced from and about African American history and culture—” as well as the way listening can “challenge, redirect, or reaffirm” underscores my understanding of Black sonicity. Unsubstantiated, it remains a dangerous assertion given the way sound has been equated with the irrational, and the centrality of the ocular to Western conceptions of logic and reason.<sup>200</sup> But the body of scholarship suggests that the trail of sound often provides an intellectual inroad to broader political and historical issues.

Like sinew, the sonic adheres in many places, and operates as more than just an historical filter. Rather, it is also a mechanism for praxis, or as bell hooks suggests, a place where “claiming voice,” and “ritual play” are also “a site of resistance.” (212) Sound, its production and its reception, intervene as tools of self determination within and beyond performance. Thus, participants in work such as that pursued by the Austin Project, use an activist aesthetic which seeks to connect cultural production, pedagogy, artistic production, activism, and scholarship to lived experience and the daily rituals of life. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones notes:

An aim of the jazz aesthetic is for the courageous choices of the artist to evolve into everyday habitual acts of freedom. Ntozake Shange references Frantz Fanon’s use of the term “combat breath” as a way to acknowledge the breath of life itself as an activist tool—it is a ready pose to push back

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<sup>200</sup> *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) is a potent collection of essays edited by David Michael Kleinberg-Levin that interrogates the history of vision and ocular-centrism in European philosophy, science and art. Kleinberg-Levin is also author of *The Philosopher's Gaze: Modernity In The Shadows Of Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) and *The Opening Of Vision: Nihilism And The Postmodern Situation* (New York: Routledge, Taylor, Francis, 1988); and Martin Jay’s *Downcast eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1993).



external definitions and conformity to the ideas and images that collapse our humanity into unrecognizable distortions. (Jones, Bridgeforth and Moore, Experiments 9)

Similar to the dictums of Brecht and Bola, the jazz aesthetic infers that the ideas encountered within the theatrical event, should not expire with the dimming of the footlights. Rather, Jones seems to suggest that the cloth from which theatrical activity is constructed—breath, voice, and utterance— represent practices both audience and performer can apply to their daily lives. Here “claiming voice” on stage, must exceed the confines of the proscenium. Incorporated into one’s habitus, the intellectual and spiritual insight of activism becomes an enduring reality.

### **The Sound of Politics**

I watch the presidential debates and listen to talk radio with an ear for performance rather than an eye for politics. Beyond theatrical performance, one finds the politics of sound ever entwined with the politics of race in the United States. I recall the storm in 2008 over comments about (then) Senator Barack Obama by fellow Senator Joe Biden, and similar comments in 2010 by Senator Harry Reid. Separately, each referenced voice and diction when describing Obama’s viability as a candidate. Biden’s comments about Obama being “articulate and bright and clean” reminded me of the way etiquette columns at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century equated boisterousness with cleaning one’s fingernails in public. And Reid’s insight on the President’s lack of any “Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one,” similarly reiterates the processes of valuation and devaluation associated with dialect choice in the public arena. Not to be outdone, the other side of the aisle seemed to hear a profound, near treasonous shift in the president’s diction when he addressed a meeting of African American business and political

leaders.<sup>201</sup> The rhetorical style that some feel captivated voters in 2008, was for his detractors a performance and indicative of an inconsistent nature.

In concert, the political landscape has witnessed the rise (and fall) of Herman Cain, Tea Party candidate. Cain's conservative political views have drawn accusations of Uncle Tom-merry from some. The extent to which his Southern Georgia diction plays into or against that charge is less than clear. But some conservatives site his unwillingness to adopt standard American diction (without really analyzing what kind of diction he is using) as an admirable quality, or as one blog comment put it, "he's not some whore who will change the way he speaks for the sake of winning approval."<sup>202</sup> Charlton McIlwain suggests that conservative support of Cain was not necessarily inspired by his particular sound. But McIlwain suggests that some were swayed by the confluence of Cain's markers of Black "authenticity" and his political message. An espousal of conservative mantras by an over-fifty, Southern Baptist, dark-skinned man possessed of a Blackness of tongue, in McIlwain's estimation, created a "silly, empty nostalgia of happy darkies" among conservative white voters. McIlwain writes:

Cain further showcases his conservative persona. In one such ad he recalls one of his greatest life lessons. "My daddy always said, 'dem that's

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<sup>201</sup> In an article for the National Review, Victor Davis Hanson characterized the change as an insincere appropriation of Civil Rights sound. He writes:

In the current racial circus, the president of the United States, in addressing an assembly of upscale black professionals and political leaders, adopts the style of a Southern Baptist preacher of the 1960s. He alters his cadences and delivery to both berate and gin up the large audience — posing as a messianic figure who will "march" them out to speak truth to power. In response, the omnipresent Rep. Maxine Waters goes public yet again, to object that the president has no right to rally blacks in this way, when he does not adopt similar tones of admonishment with Jews and gays. (Should Obama try to emulate the way he thinks gays and Jews talk in his next address to them?) (Hanson)

<sup>202</sup> A brief surf of the web will yield a range of comments concerning Cain and his vocality:

- "I would never vote for him. His command of the English language is poor. His diction makes me cringe." (Personanongrata)
- "If you think Sarah Palin has a Gomer Pyle problem, Cain has it times 3." (ccoffer)

comin', get on the wagon, dems that ain't, get out the way." Cain's quaint recollection taps into conservative nostalgia. They remind viewers that the good 'ol days were not only simpler. They were days when folks like Cain's daddy still spoke the broken English of their slave forebears, and tended the mules pulling those wagons. (McIlwain)

Whether Tea Party "revanchists" might have simply enjoyed Cain as entertainment or as a viable candidate, the world may never know. Whether Cain used diction as a means to his own end seems an equally valid question. But his book sales are up.

The disproportionate number of African Americans at the forefront of national political organizations, for a time, positioned Obama and Cain as ends of a spectrum. The arrangement tempts one to hear a concurrent sonic polarity, though the issues at play seem far more complex, far more than B(b)lack and W(w)hite. This study does not begin to address other issues of accent, dialect, and language generated by current debates over ethnicity, immigration, and the changing cultural demographics of 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. But the attention paid to these political figures' vocality pushes the issues of voice and Blackness into the downstage speakers once again. "Post Black" in the second decade of a new millennium, it would seem that a few of the old tropes on race and sound still have some play in them.

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I hear many sides and multiple tracks. I believe that a person should not be derided or excluded from a community based on speech pattern. Essentialist ideas maintain a worldview where speaking a certain way might cost an individual in a job interview or a housing opportunity. They reinforce an assumption of Black ignorance when final plosives are not crisp. They reanimate old racial politics and imagine an equation of phenotype and sound.

At the same time, we exist in a world of dying languages, of Wal-Mart and McSame-whenever-you-go-ism. I go back to my (recent) ancestral lands in central Mississippi where for seven generations my people forged an identity from the sounds

they had known for millennia. Now there are Starbucks where there used to be Black farms, and I feel the urge to preserve and protect the artifacts of my roots. Do I want the good old days to remain? No, because those days include the Crow and worse. But my Buddhist friends tell me that there must be a Golden Mean. Where is the path between the two extremes, where the unique qualities of a culture can persist can grow, without fencing itself off, excluding its own children, and narrowing itself out of existence? What is the balance between maintaining tradition and becoming inbred and exclusivist? I don't know. But I find that performance is a fascinating, productive way to experiment with these boundaries in human behavior, and a vital means of interpreting the world beyond the acoustic shell.

## APPENDIX

Table 3 AAE Segmental Features (Consonant/Vowel)

Consonant Sounds	Definition	Examples		
Consonant cluster reduction	“final consonant group or cluster composed of two consonant sounds is reduced to a single consonant sound.” <sup>203</sup>	kin [kain]	→	kind[kaind]
Devoicing consonant sounds	“consonant devoicing, that is, making a voiced consonant voiceless, applies to some consonants at the ends of words.” <sup>204</sup>	cab [kaeb]	→	cap[kaep]
		feed [fid]	à	feet [fit]
		pig [pIg]	à	pick [pIk]
Sound pattern substitution [t] or [d] for [ə] [f] or [v] for [ə]	“production of t/d and f/v in environments in words in which the [ə] sound occurs in general American English.” <sup>205</sup>	bath [baeə]	à	baf [baef]

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<sup>203</sup> (L. J. Green 107)

<sup>204</sup> (L. J. Green 116)

<sup>205</sup> (L. J. Green 117)

Table 3 AAE Segmental Features (continued)

Liquid vocalization [r] and [ɹ]	"When these sounds follow vowels within words, they are not necessarily produced as liquids; instead they may be produced as an unstressed vowel (schwa a or uh sound) if any sound is produced at all." <sup>206</sup>	'court'/[kor t]	à	court/[kot]
		'bear'/[bair]	à	bea/[baə]
		brother'/[br Λəθər]	à	brotha/[brΛv ə]
		'tore'/[tor]	à	toe/[to]
		'bell'/[bel]	à	bea/[beə]
		'pill'/[pɪl]	à	pia/[pɪə]
		'cold'/[kold ]	à	coo/[ko:]
Sound pattern substitution [n] for [ŋ]	"-ng (-ing suffix only) realized as n" <sup>207</sup>	walking	à	walkin
		running	à	runnin

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<sup>206</sup> (L. J. Green 120)

<sup>207</sup> (L. J. Green 121-22)

Table 3 AAE Segmental Features (continued)

Sound pattern substitution [skr] for [str] in syllable initial position	"-str at the initial syllable position in general American English often becomes -skr in AAE. <sup>208</sup>	street[stɹɪt]	à	skreet [skɹɪt]
		strawberry [stɹɔbɛɹɪ]	à	skrawberry [skɹɔbɛɹɪ]
		stretch [stɹɛʃ]	à	skretch [skɹɛʃ]
		straight [stɹet]	à	skraight [skɹet]
Vowel sounds	Definition	Examples		
diphthong [oɪ] for -oa	coach/ [koʃ ]	à	[koɪʃ ]	
	road[ɹod]	à	[ɹoid]	
	approach/[apɹoʃ ]	à	[apɹoɪʃ ]	
	roach [ɹoʃ ]	à	[ɹoɪʃ ]	
lowering of the [ɛ ɹ]	prepare [pɹəp <u>a</u> ɪɹ]	à	preper [pɹepɛ ɹ]	
	care [c <u>a</u> ɪɹ]	à	ker [kɛ ɹ]	
	hair [h <u>a</u> ɪɹ]	à	her [hɛ ɹ]	

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<sup>208</sup> (L. J. Green 121-22)

Table 4 AAE Super-segmental Features (Prosody)

INTONATIONAL CONTOURS	"Level patterns refers to the change (lack of change) in pitch levels known as intonational contours... AAE often uses level or falling tones in questions, especially in yes-no environments." <sup>209</sup>	e.g. "Do you want to read?"	
		<b>SE:</b> produce the word read with a final rise in intonation	<b>AAE:</b> produced neither a rising nor falling pattern; the final tone was level.
SYLLABLE INITIAL STRESS PATTERN.	fore-stressing of bisyllabic words	police	à PO.lice
		Detroit	à DE.troit
		July	à JU.ly
		define	à DE.fine
		produce	à PRO.duce
		revise	à RE.vise
		polite	à PO.lite

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<sup>209</sup> (L. J. Green 130)



Table 5 Prosodic Criteria for *The Piano Lesson* derived from Olly Wilson & Portia Maultsby's Conceptual Frameworks of Black Musical Traditions

Chorusing	Recreation Of Quotidian Sound	Fixed Rhythmic Group
Communal music-making	Combination of diverse timbres	Metronymic
Group sentiment	Several simultaneous instrument sounds.	High timbre
"Performer-audience"	A wide range of timbres within a single line	Variable rhythmic group.
Call-response	A myriad of vocal sounds used in performance	Improvisation
Responsorial choral singing	Vocal injections used to intensify musical expression	Ornamentation
Corporeality	High Density Of Musical Events Within A Short Musical Time Frame.	Timbral Manipulation
Percussivity	Rhythmic And Implied Metrical Contrast	Juxtapose Pitch Ranges
Vocality-instrumentality fluidity	Rhythmic complexity	Polar extremes
Unaccompanied music	Organization of musical ensembles into time line strata	Embellishments

Figure 1 Phonological Imitations of AAE in Amos & Andy (Elizabeth McLeod)<sup>210</sup>

- Stopped initial fricatives (d- for th- as in "dis," "dat" for "this" and "that")
- Nasal Replacement ("going" becomes "goin'," "walking" becomes "walkin'")
- Absence of the postvocalic "r" ("here" becomes "heah," "sure" becomes "sho")
- Absence of the postvocalic "l" ("help" becomes "he'p")
- Substitution of labiodental fricatives for interdental fricatives ("mouth" becomes "mouf," "both" becomes "bofe," "with" becomes "wid")
- Elision of unstressed initial syllables ("bout" for "about," "splain" for "explain.")
- Hypercorrection may create fancified forms: "regusted," "repression")
- Consonant cluster reduction ("mos" for "most," "des" for "desk," etc.) is only rarely specified in the scripts, but surviving recordings reveal that this marker is frequently present in the performers' actual delivery of the lines

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<sup>210</sup> (McLeod 89)

Figure 2 Grammatical Imitations of AAE in Amos & Andy (Elizabeth McLeod)<sup>211</sup>

- Present-tense zero copula used where appropriate: whenever Standard English can contract "is" or "are" to 's or 're, African American Vernacular English allows the option of full contraction of the copula ("He is going" contracts to "He goin")
- Auxiliary "Is" replaces "Have/Has" and variants ("We is got it," "Is you got it?")
- Existential "It" used in sense "There exists" ("It's two dollars in my pocket")
- Third-person present tense marker is absent ("He go" replaces "He goes," but hypercorrection is sometimes present in first-person singular: "I goes")
- Pronominal cross-reference markers used where appropriate ("Our friend Henry, he got a buildin' fo' sale")
- Perfective "done" in pre-verb position ("He done gone home," "Done had de inside painted up")
- "Come" used in semiauxiliary position ("He come tellin' me dat")
- Adverbial "like to" indicates "almost" or "nearly" ("I like to died laughin")
- Multiple negation indicates emphasis ("Ain't nobody seen dat nohow!")
- Habitual "be" ("I be workin'" for "I am steadily employed" but not "I am working at this moment") used very rarely but correctly. Sociolinguist William Labov points out that the habitual or invariant "be" —taken as a definitive characteristic of current-day African American Vernacular English—did not attain that status until after World War II, a sign that Black English is a dialect in a continuing state of evolution.<sup>7</sup>
- Stressed durative "been" ("He been out o' work" for "He is unemployed and has been unemployed for some time") used rarely but correctly
- Occasional semantic inversion ("He's a bad man wid de ladies")

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<sup>211</sup> (McLeod 89)

Figure 3 Zora Neale Hurston's Examples of Linguistic Adornment

#### METAPHOR AND SIMILE

- One at a time, like lawyers going to heaven.
- You sho is propaganda.
- Sobbing hearted.
- Ill beat you till:
  - *rope like okra,*
  - *slack like lime,*
  - *smell like onions.*
- Fatal for naked.
- Kyting along.
- That's a rope.
- Cloakers—deceivers.
- Regular as pig-tracks.
- Mule blood—Black molasses.
- Syndicating—gossiping.
- Flambeaux—cheap cafe (lighted by flambeaux).
- To put yo'self on de ladder.

#### THE DOUBLE DESCRIPTIVE

- High-tall.
- Little-tee-ninchy (tiny).
- Low-down.
- Top-superior.
- Sham-polish.
- Lady-people.
- Kill-dead.
- Hot-boiling.
- Chop-axe.
- Sitting-chairs.
- De watch wall.
- Speedy-hurry.
- More great and more better.

#### VERBAL NOUNS

- She features somebody I know.
- Funeralize.
- Sense me into it.
- Puts the shamery on him.
- 'Taint everybody you kin confidence.
- I wouldn't friend with her.
- Jooking—playing piano or guitar as it is done in Jook-houses (houses of ill-fame).
- Uglying away.
- I wouldn't scorn my name all up on you.
- Bookooing (beaucoup) around showing off.

#### NOUNS FROM VERBS

- Won't stand a broke.
- She won't take a listen.
- He won't stand straightening.
- That is such a compliment.
- That's a lynch

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